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A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

A PLAY

CLEMENCE DANE

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A
BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

A PLAY

BY

CLEMENCE DANE

LEGEND

FIRST THE BLADE

REGIMENT OF WOMEN

Winifred Ashton

A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

A PLAY

BY

CLEMENCE DANE

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1921

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THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY
IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

MARGARET FAIRFIELD

MISS HESTER FAIRFIELD

SYDNEY FAIRFIELD

BASSETT

GRAY MEREDITH

KIT PUMPHREY

HILARY FAIRFIELD

DR. ALLIOT

THE REV. CHRISTOPHER PUMPHREY

MAY 13

SCENE

A Small House in the Country

The action passes on Christmas Day, 1933.

The audience is asked to imagine that the divorce bill, at present under discussion, has become the law of the land.

ACT I.—The hall: morning.

ACT II.—The drawing-room: early afternoon.

ACT III.—The hall: late afternoon.

ACT I

The curtain rises on the hall, obviously used as the common room of a country house. On the right (of the audience) is the outer door and a staircase that runs down from an upper landing toward the middle of the room, half hiding what has once been a separate smaller room with a baize door at the back. In the corner a French window opens on to a snow-bound garden. On the left, facing the entrance, a log fire is blazing. Staircase, pictures, grandfather clock, etc., are wreathed with holly and mistletoe. At the breakfast table, which is laid for three and littered with paper and string, sit Miss Hester Fairfield and Margaret Fairfield, her niece by marriage. The third chair has two or three parcels piled up on it.

Hester Fairfield is one of those twitching, high-minded, elderly ladies in black who keep a grievance as they might keep a pet dog — as soon as it dies they replace it by another. The grievance of the moment seems to be the empty third chair, and Margaret Fairfield is, as usual, on the defensive. Such a little, pretty, helpless-looking woman as Margaret has generally half a dozen big sons and a husband to bully; but Margaret has only a daughter, and her way of looking at even the chair in which that daughter ought to be sitting, is the way of a child whose doll has suddenly come to life. For the rest, she is so youthfully anxious and simple and charming that the streak of gray in her hair puzzles you. You wonder what

trouble has fingered it. It does not occur to you that she is quite thirty-five.

MARGARET

[*Apologizing.*]

Yes, she *is* late.

MISS FAIRFIELD

As usual.

MARGARET

Oh, well, she was dancing till three. I hadn't the heart to wake her.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Till three, was she? Who brought her home?

MARGARET

Kit, of course.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Three o'clock on Christmas morning! I wonder what the rector said to that.

MARGARET

Oh, Kit's on holiday.

MISS FAIRFIELD

I heard you tell her myself to be in by twelve. If anything could make me approve of this marriage of yours —

MARGARET

Oh, don't begin it again, auntie!

MISS FAIRFIELD

— it's that the child will have a strong hand over her at last. A stepfather's better than nothing — if

you can call him a stepfather when her father's still alive.

MARGARET

Oh, don't!

MISS FAIRFIELD

What's the use of saying "don't"? He *is* alive. You can't get away from that.

MARGARET

Aunt Hester — *please!*

MISS FAIRFIELD

Well, I'm only telling you — if it's got to be, I'm not sorry it's Gray Meredith.

MARGARET

[*Smiling.*]

Yes, Sydney knows just how far she may go with Gray.

MISS FAIRFIELD

I see nothing to laugh at in that.

MARGARET

It's so funny to think how circumspect you all are with him. He's the one person I've always felt perfectly safe with. I'd ask anything of Gray.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Grimly.*]

You always have, my dear!

MARGARET

I don't know why you should be unkind to me on Christmas morning.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*With a sort of grudging affection.*]

I suppose it's because I've only got another week to be unkind to you in.

MARGARET

[*Restlessly.*]

Oh, I wish you didn't hate it so.

MISS FAIRFIELD

My dear, when you see a person you care for, and she your own nephew's wife, on the brink of deadly sin —

MARGARET

Must we begin it again?

MISS FAIRFIELD

I do my duty. If you'd done yours your daughter wouldn't be late for breakfast, and I shouldn't be given the opportunity.

MARGARET

Perhaps I *had* better call her.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Everything getting cold — and so disrespectful! She ought to be taught.

MARGARET

[*Rising with a sigh.*]

You're quite right.

[*Calling at the foot of the stairs.*]

Sydney, darling, shall I bring you up your coffee?

SYDNEY'S VOICE

[*Answering.*]

It's all right, mother, I'm coming.

MISS FAIRFIELD

And I suppose that's all you'll say.

[*Sydney comes out of her room. She is physically a bigger, fairer edition of Margaret, but there the likeness ends. Her manner is brisk and decided. She is very sure of herself, but when she loses her temper, as she often does, she loses her aplomb and reveals the schoolgirl. Her attitude to the world is that of justice untempered, except where her mother is in question, by mercy. But she is very fond of her mother.*]

SYDNEY

[*Running down the stairs.*]

Merry Christmas every one! I'm not late, am I? Morning, auntie! What, no post?

MARGARET

It gets later every year.

MISS FAIRFIELD

I'm very much obliged to you, Sydney, for the — cardcase.

SYDNEY

[*Undoing her parcels.*]

It's a cigarette case, auntie dear. You see, I thought if you gave me a prayer book again we might do a deal. Ah, I thought so! Thanks most awfully. It's sweet of you. Shall we?

MISS FAIRFIELD

What?

SYDNEY

Swap.

MARGARET

Sydney, dear, that's rather rude.

SYDNEY

[*Swiftly.*]

Well, mother, I hate being hinted at.

MARGARET

[*Bewildered.*]

Hint? What hint?

SYDNEY

Oh, mother, you're such a lamb. You never see anything.

[*To Miss Fairfield.*]

I'm sorry, auntie, but I'm seventeen, and I've left school, and I am not going to church to-day, or any day any more ever, except to chaperon mother and Gray next week, bless 'em!

MISS FAIRFIELD

I do think, Margaret, she ought at least to call him "Uncle."

MARGARET

Aren't you coming with us to-day, darling? Christmas Day?

SYDNEY

Sorry, mother. It's against my principles. I refuse to kneel down and say I'm a miserable sinner.

I'm not miserable and I'm not a sinner, and I cannot tell a lie to please any old — prayer book. Besides, I'm expecting Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD

You'll find that Kit takes his mother to church. *She* hasn't lost all her influence —

SYDNEY

[*Darkly.*]

She'll be finding herself up against me soon.

MARGARET

[*Like a schoolgirl.*]

Oh, Sydney, has he —?

SYDNEY

He's trying his hardest to, but I like to sort of *spread* my jam.

MARGARET

Then — then —?

SYDNEY

I'm not actually engaged, if you mean that —

[*Watching their faces mischievously.*]

— but I'm going to be.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Engaged at seventeen! Preposterous!

SYDNEY

[*Instantly.*]

Mother was married at seventeen.

MARGARET

That was the war.

SYDNEY

I don't see what that's got to do with it.

MARGARET

[*Timidly.*]

Sydney — at seventeen, one doesn't know enough —

SYDNEY

One doesn't know the same things, I dare say.

MARGARET

One doesn't know anything at all.

SYDNEY

Yes, but think of the hopeless sort of world you were seventeen in — even you. As for poor auntie, as far as knowing things goes —

MARGARET

Sydney, my dear, be good!

SYDNEY

I am being good; I'm returning hint for hint.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Ruffling.*]

Is this the way you let your daughter speak to me, Margaret?

SYDNEY

[*Closing with her.*]

You see, she doesn't enjoy being hinted at either.

MARGARET

[*Between the upper and the nether millstone.*]

I don't know what you mean, Sydney, but *don't!*

SYDNEY

I mean that I'm not going to let Aunt Hester interfere in my affairs like she does in yours. That's what I mean.

MISS FAIRFIELD

These are the manners they teach you at your fine school, I suppose.

SYDNEY

Never mind, auntie, I've had my lessons in the holidays too. You needn't think I haven't watched the life you've led mother over this divorce business.

MARGARET

[*Distressed at the discussion.*]

Sydney! Sydney!

SYDNEY

[*Remorselessly.*]

Well, hasn't she? What prevented you from marrying Gray ages ago? Father's been out of his mind long enough, poor man! You knew you were free to be free. You knew you were making Gray miserable and yourself miserable — and yet, though that divorce law has been in force for years, it's taken you all this time to fight your scruples. At least, you call them scruples! What you really mean is Aunt Hester and her prayer book. And now, when you have at last consented to give yourself a chance of being happy

— when it's Christmas Day and you're going to be married at New Year's — still you let Aunt Hester sit at your own breakfast table and insult you with talk about deadly sin. It's no use pretending you didn't, auntie, because mother left my door open and I heard you.

MARGARET

[*With a certain dignity.*]

Sydney, I can take care of myself.

SYDNEY

[*Obvious of it.*]

Take care of yourself! As if everybody didn't ride roughshod over you when I'm not there.

MARGARET

Yes, but my pet, you mustn't break out like this. Of course your aunt knows you don't really mean to be rude —

SYDNEY

I do mean to be rude to her when she's rude to you.

MARGARET

My dear, you quite misunderstood your aunt.

SYDNEY

Oh, no, I didn't, mother!

[*Margaret shrugs her shoulders helplessly and sits down on the sofa to the left of the fireplace.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Rising.*]

I'm afraid you'll have to go to church without me,

Margaret. I'm thoroughly upset. You've brought up your daughter to ignore me, and I know why. I'm the wrong side of the family. I'm the one person in this house who remembers poor Hilary. I shall read the service in the drawing-room.

[*She goes out.*]

SYDNEY

[*Looking after her.*]

She owes me something. She's been dying for an excuse, with that cold.

[*She turns to the sofa and says more gently.*]

What's the use of crying, mother? If Gray finds out there'll be a row, and then Aunt Hester'll be sorry she ever was born.

MARGARET

It isn't that. You get so excited, Sydney! You remind me — your father was so excitable. I don't like to see it.

SYDNEY

I'm not really. I needn't let myself go if I don't want to.

MARGARET

You mustn't get impatient with your aunt. She can't get accustomed to the new ways, that's all. I — I can't myself, sometimes.

[*Restlessly.*]

I hope I'm doing right.

SYDNEY

Oh, I do think it's morbid to have a conscience.

If father had been dead fifteen years, would you say "I hope I'm doing right"? And he *is* dead. His mind's dead. You know you've done all you can. And you're frightfully in love with Gray —

MARGARET

[*Flushing.*]

Don't, Sydney!

SYDNEY

Well, you are, and so he is with you. So what's the worry about? Aunt Hester! What people like Aunt Hester choose to think! I call it morbid.

MARGARET

[*Whimsically.*]

I suppose I haven't brought you up properly. Your aunt's quite right.

SYDNEY

Yes. That's what it always comes back to. "Your aunt's quite right!" I can argue with you by the hour —

MARGARET

[*Hastily.*]

Oh, not this morning, darling, will you?

SYDNEY

— and Gray can argue with you by the hour —

MARGARET

[*Smiling.*]

Ah, but he never does.

SYDNEY

— and you pretend to agree with us; but underneath

your common sense your mind's really thinking: "Your aunt's quite right!"

MARGARET

She stands for the old ways, Sydney.

SYDNEY

She stands for Noah and the flood. She'd no business to go dragging up father and the divorce on Christmas morning to upset you.

MARGARET

It wasn't your aunt.

SYDNEY

Then it was me, I suppose! "If I could only control my tongue and my temper" and all the rest of it!

MARGARET

[*Quietly.*]

No, it was about Kit.

SYDNEY

Kit? Oh, that's all right, mother. Don't you worry about me and Kit.

MARGARET

I do.

SYDNEY

You needn't.

MARGARET

[*Shyly.*]

You see, I thought I was in love at seventeen too.

SYDNEY

Oh, but I quite know what I'm doing.

MARGARET

And now I know I didn't know much about it. I don't want you to be — rushed.

SYDNEY

Nobody could make me do what I didn't want to do.

MARGARET

[*Forgetting Sydney.*]

It was nobody's fault. It was the war —

[*She sits, dreaming.*]

SYDNEY

It's extraordinary to me — whenever you middle-aged people want to excuse yourselves for anything you've done that you know you oughtn't to have done, you say it was the war. How could a war make you get married if you didn't want to?

MARGARET

[*Groping for words.*]

It was the feel in the air. They say the smell of blood sends horses crazy. That was the feel. One did mad things. Hilary — your father — he was going out — the trenches — to be hurt. And he was so fond of me he frightened me. I was so sorry. I thought I cared. Can't you understand?

SYDNEY

No. Either you care or you don't.

MARGARET

[*Passionately.*]

How can you know until it happens to you? How

was I to know there was more to it than keeping house and looking after Hilary — and you? How was I to know?

SYDNEY

[*Doubtfully.*]

Is there so much more to it?

MARGARET

Yes.

SYDNEY

I don't believe there is for some people. Why, it's just what I want — to look after Kit and a house of my own and — oh, at least half a dozen kids.

MARGARET

[*Uncomfortably.*]

Sydney, dear!

SYDNEY

Oh, Kit's as keen as I am on eugenics. He's doing a paper for his debating society.

MARGARET

Well, I found you quite enough to manage.

SYDNEY

[*Leaning over the back of the sofa.*]

I believe you were scared of me when I was little —

[*Margaret nods.*]

— and even now —

MARGARET

[*Quickly.*]

What?

SYDNEY

[*Quite good-humored about it.*]

Well, if you had to choose between me and Gray, it wouldn't be Gray who'd lose you.

MARGARET

[*Confronted with the idea.*]

I hope I'd do what's right.

SYDNEY

[*Airily.*]

There you are!

MARGARET

[*As it goes home.*]

It's not true. You've no right to make me out a heartless mother. But —

SYDNEY

[*Her arm round her mother's neck.*]

Well — heartless mother?

MARGARET

[*Clutching at the arm.*]

Oh, Sydney — what should I do if Gray — if Gray —

SYDNEY

It's all right, mother!

[*There is the sound of a motor driving up.*]

There is Gray.

MARGARET

[*Jumping up hurriedly.*]

Oh, and I'm not dressed. Say I'll be down in a minute.

[*She runs upstairs.*]

SYDNEY

You've plenty of time. The bells haven't begun yet.

MARGARET

[*From the gallery.*]

Tell Bassett to clear away.

[*Sydney rings the bell. The elderly parlor maid enters through the baize door.*]

BASSETT

Yes, miss?

SYDNEY

You can clear away, Bassett.

[*While she is speaking Gray Meredith comes in through the hall door. He is about forty, tall, dark, and quiet, very sure of himself, and quite indifferent to the effect he makes on other people. As he is a man who never has room in his head for more than one idea at a time, and as, for the last five years, that idea has been Margaret, the rest of the world doesn't get much out of him. But mention her and he behaves exactly like a fire being poked.*]

GRAY

[*Putting down the box he carries.*]

Where's your mother?

SYDNEY

[*Folding her hands.*]

Good morning, dear Sydney! A merry Christmas to you and so many thanks for the tie that, with the help of your devoted aunt, you so thoughtfully —

GRAY

Stop it, there's a good child! I haven't missed her, have I?

SYDNEY

Pray accept in return as a small token of esteem and total dependency —

GRAY

I asked you if your mother had started.

SYDNEY

[*In her natural voice.*]

It's true, you know. You simply daren't cope with me yet.

GRAY

[*Twinkling in spite of himself.*]

H'm! A time will come —

SYDNEY

Wouldn't it warm the cockles of Aunt Hester's heart to hear you! What are cockles, Gray? Gray, she says I ought to call you uncle! Gray, d'you think you've brought me what I think you have for a Christmas present?

GRAY

You'd better go and look. It's in the motor with Kit.

SYDNEY

It?

GRAY

He.

SYDNEY

By Viscount out of Vixen?

GRAY

Really, Sydney!

SYDNEY

Dear Uncle Hester?

GRAY

Yes, but Sydney —?

SYDNEY

[*At the door.*]

Oh, didn't I tell you? Mother says she'll be down in a minute.

[*She lets in the sound of the church bell as she goes out.*]

[*Gray walks about the room; then, going to the foot of the staircase, he calls softly.*]

Margaret!

[*He waits a moment: then he calls again.*]

Margaret!

[*He listens, takes another turn about the room, then, coming back to the staircase, stands leaning against the foot of the balusters. Margaret comes softly down the stairs and bending over puts her hands on his shoulders.*]

MARGARET

A merry Christmas!

GRAY

[*Turning round and kissing her.*]

And a happy New Year!

MARGARET

It will be — oh, it will be!

GRAY

I almost think it will sometimes.

[*Holding her at arm's length.*]

New frock?

MARGARET

Like it?

GRAY

Oh, *I've* seen it already.

MARGARET

Why, it's the first time I've put it on.

GRAY

[*Untying the box on the table as he speaks.*]

Sydney carted it along with her last week when we went to choose — this.

MARGARET

[*Like a child with a new toy.*]

For me, Gray?

GRAY

Looks like it.

MARGARET

Oh, I hope you haven't been extravagant.

GRAY

[*Opening the lid.*]

Well, Sydney said —

MARGARET

Silver fox! Oh, my dear, you shouldn't!

GRAY

Put 'em on. Sydney's quite a wise child.

MARGARET

[*Luxuriously.*]

Oh, I do love being spoiled.

GRAY

You haven't had so much of it, have you, Meg?

MARGARET

[*With a complete change of manner.*]

Don't!

GRAY

What?

MARGARET

Don't call me Meg.

GRAY

Why not?

MARGARET

You never have before.

GRAY

Don't you see, I want a name for you that no one else uses.

MARGARET

[*Close to him.*]

Yes, yes, that no one else has ever used. Not Meg. Not Margaret. Make a name of your own for me — new — new.

GRAY

Well, you're getting one new name pretty soon, anyhow.

MARGARET

Yes. New Year — new name — new life.

[*In his arms.*]

Oh, Gray, is thirty-five very old?

GRAY

Not when you say it.

MARGARET

Oh, Gray, we've time for everything still?

GRAY

Time for everything.

[*He laughs.*]

Except church, my child! Do you really insist on going?

MARGARET

Aunt Hester will be horrified if I don't. Besides —

[*She comes back to the table and begins putting the papers together.*]

GRAY

What?

MARGARET

I suppose you'll think me a fool —

GRAY

Shall I?

MARGARET

Oh, Gray, for the first time in my life I'm happy. I want to say —

GRAY

What does she want to say?

MARGARET

" Humble and hearty thanks —"

[*Sydney runs in with a puppy in her arms. She is followed by Kit. Kit is a good-looking, fair-haired boy who may be twenty-two, but is nevertheless much younger than Sydney, whom he takes as seriously as*

he takes everything else in life. It is part of her charm for him that he finds it a little difficult to keep up with her.]

SYDNEY

Mother! Mother! Look what Gray's brought me!

MARGARET

Oh, Sydney, your aunt isn't fond of dogs. Merry Christmas, Kit!

KIT

Merry Christmas, Mrs. Fairfield!

SYDNEY

Yes, but isn't he an angel? And Kit's given me a collar for him.

[*She goes up to Gray.*]

You know, Gray, it's so sweet of you that in return I'll —

GRAY

Well?

SYDNEY

[*Conspiratorially.*]

Make Kit late for church if you like.

GRAY

[*Putting himself in her hands.*]

I did promise him a lift.

SYDNEY

[*Settling it.*]

He can cut across the fields.

[*Aloud.*]

Kit, what about a bone for the angel? You might go and make love to Bassett.

[*She puts the dog into his arms. They stroll off together into the inner room.*]

KIT

[*Earnestly, as he goes out through the baize door.*]

He ought to be kept to biscuits.

SYDNEY

[*Calling to him.*]

Just one to gnaw.

[*Then, over her shoulder.*]

Mother, the bells have been going quite a while.

MARGARET

[*To Gray.*]

Listen, don't you love them?

GRAY

Church bells?

MARGARET

Wedding bells.

GRAY

Margaret, you've stepped straight out of a Trollope novel.

MARGARET

[*Flushing.*]

I suppose you think I'm sentimental.

GRAY

No, but you're pure nineteenth century.

MARGARET

I'm not.

[*Telephone bell rings.*]

Oh!

GRAY

There goes the twentieth. Don't you see how it makes you jump?

[*Sydney has gone to the telephone.*]

SYDNEY

Hullo! Hullo! . . . You rang me up.

[*She hangs up the receiver.*]

Sorry you have been trubbled! And it's sure to be some one trying to get on.

GRAY

On Christmas morning? Hardly! I say, come along! The bells have stopped.

MARGARET

[*In a strange voice.*]

Yes, they stopped when that other bell rang.

SYDNEY

Why, mother, what's the matter?

MARGARET

[*Blindly.*]

They stopped.

SYDNEY

I told you, darling, you're late.

MARGARET

Give me my furs. I'm cold.

[*Gray helps her on with them.*]

SYDNEY

[*Proud of her.*]

They *are* lovely.

MARGARET

[*At the door, wistfully.*]

It isn't too good to be true, is it?

GRAY

The furs?

MARGARET

Everything! You — oh, what a fool I am!

[*You hear Gray's laugh answering hers as they go out together, and the sound of the motor driving away.*]

SYDNEY

[*Subsiding on to the sofa, to Kit, who has come in as the others go.*]

I thought they'd never get off. Mother has a way of standing around and gently fussing — I tell you I'll be glad when next week's over.

KIT

So'll I. I haven't had a look in lately.

SYDNEY

[*With an intimate glance.*]

Not last night? But it has been a job, running mother. I'm bridesmaid and best man and family lawyer and Juliet's nurse all rolled into one — and a sort of lightning conductor for Aunt Hester into the bargain. That's why I've had so little time for you. It's quite true what Gray was saying just now — Mother *is* nineteenth century. She's sweet and helpless, but she's obstinate too. My word, the time she took making up her mind to get that divorce!

KIT

It's just about that that I've been wanting to talk to you. You see —

SYDNEY

Well?

KIT

You see —

SYDNEY

Hurry up, old thing!

KIT

Well, you see, when I got home last night the governor was sitting up for me.

SYDNEY

He would be.

KIT

And in the course of the row — *you* came in to it.

SYDNEY

Oh, but he likes me.

KIT

Yes, he was quite soothed when I said we were engaged.

SYDNEY

Liar!

KIT

[*Serenely.*]

Oh, well —

SYDNEY

[*She finds his chuckle infectious.*]

What did he say?

KIT

Oh, lots of rot, of course, about being too young. But he was quite bucked really until —

SYDNEY

Well?

KIT

Well, I was a fool. I said something, quite by chance, about your father. Then the fur began to fly. You see, it seems he thought your mother was a widow —

SYDNEY

[*Ruffling up.*]

What's it got to do with him?

KIT

Well, you see —

SYDNEY

If you'd only make me see instead of you — seeing me all the time.

KIT

I'm afraid of hurting your feelings.

SYDNEY

I'm not nineteenth century.

KIT

[*Desperately.*]

Well, my people are.

SYDNEY

Well?

KIT

That's the trouble — my people are! Father promptly began about not seeing his way to —

SYDNEY

To what, Kit?

KIT

To — to marrying them.

SYDNEY

But I've never heard of anything so crazy.

KIT

Of course, you know, there's nothing to worry about. There are heaps of clergymen who will.

SYDNEY

My dear boy, if mother isn't married in her own parish church she'll think she's living in sin.

KIT

Well, there it is!

SYDNEY

But look here, the old rector knew all about it. Do you mean to say that a new man can come into our parish and insult mother just because his beastly conscience doesn't work the same way the old rector's did. The divorce is perfectly legal.

KIT

[*In great discomfort.*]

Yes, father knows all that.

[*Hopefully.*]

Of course, I don't see myself why a registry office —

SYDNEY

If it were me I'd prefer it. Much less fuss. But mother wouldn't.

KIT

But she ought to see —

SYDNEY

But she won't. It's no good reckoning on what people ought to be. You've got to deal with them as they are.

KIT

[*Guiltily.*]

Well, I'm awfully sorry.

SYDNEY

It's no use being sorry. We've got to do something.

KIT

[*Hopelessly.*]

When once the old man gets an idea into his head —

SYDNEY

He'd better not let it out in front of mother. Gray'd half kill him if he did. And I tell you this, Kit, what Gray leaves I'll account for, even if he is your father. Poor little mother!

KIT

Well, I'm all on your side, you know that. But of course, Sydney, a clergyman needn't remarry divorced people. It's in that bill. The governor was quoting it to-day.

SYDNEY

But doesn't he know the circumstances?

KIT

He only knows what I do.

SYDNEY

One doesn't shout things at people, naturally. But it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's only that my unfortunate father's been in an asylum ever since I can remember. Shell shock. It began before I was born. He never came home again. Mother had to give up going to see him even; it excited him so frightfully.

KIT

Pretty tragic.

SYDNEY

Oh, for years now he hasn't known any one, luckily. And he's well looked after. He's quite all right.

KIT

[*Uncomfortably.*]

You're a queer girl.

SYDNEY

But he is.

KIT

Yes — but —

SYDNEY

What?

KIT

Your own father —

SYDNEY

[*Impatiently.*]

My dear boy, I've never even seen him. Oh, of course, it's very sad, but I can't go about with my handkerchief to my eyes all the time, can I?

KIT

Yes — but —

SYDNEY

I hate cant.

KIT

[*Leaning over the back of the sofa, his hands playing with her chain.*]

You little brute — you're as hard as nails, aren't you?

SYDNEY

[*Putting up her face to him.*]

Am I?

[*They kiss.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Passing through.*]

Really, Sydney! Before lunch!

KIT

You know, old thing, sometimes I don't feel as if I should ever really get on with your aunt.

SYDNEY

[*Dimpling.*]

You'll have to if —

KIT

Good Lord! You don't want her in the house!

SYDNEY

[*Calmly.*]

I must take her off mother sometimes. That's only fair. But she sha'n't worry you.

KIT

I say, you're going to have things your own way, aren't you?

SYDNEY

But of course I am, darling.

KIT

[*Heavily.*]

But look here — marriage is a sort of mutual show, isn't it? We've got to pull together.

SYDNEY

Of course.

KIT

But suppose we come to a crossroads, so to speak?

SYDNEY

Well, somebody'll have to give way, won't they, darling?

KIT

H'm!

SYDNEY

My dear boy, if you want a doormat you'd better look out for some one — some one like poor dear mother, for instance.

KIT

[*Wiser than he knows.*]

But you *are* like her, Sydney!

SYDNEY

Me? Do you think I'd let my daughter run me the way I run mother? Not much!

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Reëntering.*]

I think I left my —

[*Murmurs.*]

SYDNEY

[*Aside.*]

It's no good. She's doing this on purpose because I cheeked her. You'd better go, old man. Besides they must be well through the anthem.

KIT

[*Disturbed.*]

Good Lord! I should think I *had* better go!

SYDNEY

[*Going to the door with him.*]

I say, keep your father quiet till I've had time to talk to Gray.

KIT

Right!

[*He goes out.*]

SYDNEY

[*Calling.*]

Kit!

KIT

[*Reappearing.*]

Yes.

SYDNEY

Come round in the afternoon.

KIT

Right!

[*He goes out.*]

SYDNEY

[*Calling.*]

Kit!

KIT

[*Reappearing.*]

Yes.

SYDNEY

I don't suppose there'll ever be any crossroads.

KIT

Darling!

[*A scuffle. Sydney reappears patting her hair.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

I'm afraid I disturbed a tête-à-tête.

SYDNEY

[*Sweetly.*]

Oh, auntie, whatever made you think that?

MISS FAIRFIELD

But I really couldn't sit in the drawing-room. There's no fire.

[*She sits down and opens her book.*]

SYDNEY

[*In a soft little voice, hums.*]

" When we are married we'll have sausages for tea."

MISS FAIRFIELD

Do you mind being quiet while I read the service?

SYDNEY

Sorry!

[*She takes up some knitting.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

What are you doing?

SYDNEY

Tie for Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Sydney! Needlework on Sunday!

SYDNEY

Well, I can't sit in the drawing-room either if there's no fire.

MISS FAIRFIELD

There's no need to lose your temper.

SYDNEY

[*Out of patience.*]

Here, I'm going.

[*As she makes for the staircase the telephone gives a broken tinkle.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

Sydney, I believe that telephone's going off!

SYDNEY

Yes, I'm sure it's some one trying to get on. They've rung up once already.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Sydney, I won't be left to deal with it.

[*The telephone rings deafeningly.*]

There, I told you so.

SYDNEY

Well, it's not my fault!

[*She takes off the receiver.*]

Hullo! Hullo! . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . .

[*To her aunt.*]

It's a trunk call.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Who on earth — ?

SYDNEY

Yes. . . . Hullo! . . . Yes. . . . Mrs. Fairfield's out. Shall I take a message? . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking. . . . All right, I'll hold on. . . .

[*To her aunt.*]

Auntie, it's from Bedford. It's about father.

[*Into the telephone.*]

Yes. . . . This is Miss Fairfield speaking. . . . What? . . . Good Lord!

MISS FAIRFIELD

Sydney, don't say "Good Lord!"

SYDNEY

But you should have let Mrs. Fairfield know! . . . Only this morning? Oh, I see. . . . No, we've heard nothing. When did you find out? . . . What makes you — ? I see! . . . No, he's not here. . . . Of course we'd let you know. . . . Then you'll let us know at once if anything . . . yes . . . Miss Fairfield. Mrs. Fairfield is going away very soon. . . . Thank you. . . . Good-by.

[*Sydney hangs up the receiver and turns round.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

Well?

SYDNEY

Father's got away.

MISS FAIRFIELD

What? Who spoke to you?

SYDNEY

The head man — what's his name? Rogers! Frightfully upset.

MISS FAIRFIELD

I should think so. Why, the poor fellow's dangerous.

SYDNEY

Apparently he's been very much better lately, and this last week, a marked change, he says.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Agitated.*]

You mean he's getting well?

SYDNEY

Looks like it. Rogers was awfully guarded but — apparently they'd already written to Uncle Hugh and the solicitors.

MISS FAIRFIELD

They ought to have written to me.

SYDNEY

Of course, they wouldn't write to mother — now — but we ought to have heard.

MISS FAIRFIELD

When did they miss him?

SYDNEY

This morning. Then a lot about it's being inexplicable and the precautions they had taken and so on. The fact remains that he has managed to get away.

MISS FAIRFIELD

It's disgraceful carelessness.

SYDNEY

Their theory is that he has suddenly come to himself. Is it possible, auntie? Can it happen? After sixteen years?

MISS FAIRFIELD

It's quite possible. It does. It was the same with my poor sister, Grace. After ten years, that was.

SYDNEY

But the doctors said incurable.

MISS FAIRFIELD

The Almighty's greater than the doctors. And nerves — nerves are queer things. I nursed your Aunt Grace. Well, I always told your mother to wait.

SYDNEY

[*Struck.*]

Is that a fact about Aunt Grace? Was she out of her mind too?

MISS FAIRFIELD

She never had to be sent away.

SYDNEY

Nobody ever told me.

MISS FAIRFIELD

There's something in most families.

SYDNEY

But with father — wasn't it shell shock?

MISS FAIRFIELD

It was brought on by shell shock.

SYDNEY

D'you mean that in our family there's insanity?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Fidgeting.*]

That's not the way to talk. But we're nervy, all of us, we're nervy. Your poor father would have been no worse than the rest if it hadn't been for the war.

SYDNEY

[*Slowly.*]

What do you mean, "nervy"?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*With a sidelong glance.*]

I mean the way you're taking this.

SYDNEY

[*Sharply.*]

How am I taking it?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Irritated.*]

Well, look at you now.

SYDNEY

[*Coldly.*]

I'm perfectly under control.

MISS FAIRFIELD

That's it. It's not natural.

SYDNEY

[*Slowly.*]

You mean, I shouldn't bother to control myself if —

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Hastily.*]

You're too young to think about such things.

SYDNEY

— if I weren't afraid, you mean. Did mother know — when she married?

MISS FAIRFIELD

I tell you there are troubles in every family, but one doesn't talk about them.

SYDNEY

But did she *know* the trouble was insanity?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Shortly.*]

I don't know.

SYDNEY

Did father?

MISS FAIRFIELD

One always knows in a general sort of way.

SYDNEY

[*Relentlessly.*]

Am I nervy?

MISS FAIRFIELD

Young people don't have nerves.

SYDNEY

Insanity! A thing you can hand on! And I told Kit it was shell shock!

MISS FAIRFIELD

I don't see what difference it makes to Christopher.

SYDNEY

You don't see what difference —? You don't see —?

[*To herself.*]

But I see —

[*There is a pause.*]

Aunt Hester, suppose father really gets well —?

MISS FAIRFIELD

Well?

SYDNEY

Whatever will he do?

MISS FAIRFIELD

It's a question of what your mother will do.

SYDNEY

But it won't have anything to do with mother.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Grimly.*]

Won't it?

SYDNEY

What on earth are you driving at?

MISS FAIRFIELD

I can't discuss it with you.

SYDNEY

Why not?

MISS FAIRFIELD

You're too young.

SYDNEY

I'm old enough to be engaged.

MISS FAIRFIELD

You're not engaged.

SYDNEY

[*Insolently.*]

Kissed then. You saw that half an hour ago, didn't you? I might just as well say I can't discuss it with you because you're too old.

MISS FAIRFIELD

How dare you speak to me like that?

SYDNEY

[*Beside herself.*]

Oh, are *all* old people such stone walls? Here's a shadow, here's a trouble, here's a ghost in the house — and when I ask you what shall I do, you talk about your blessed dignity!

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Rising.*]

This is the second time in one morning that you have driven me out of the room.

SYDNEY

[*Ringing her hands.*]

Well, I'm sorry! But I'm so worried. Don't you see I've got to keep it off mother?

[*Following her irresolutely.*]

Auntie, if you'd only be decent —

[*But Miss Fairfield has gone out. Sydney turns back into the room.*]

If I only knew what to do!

[*She stands hesitating. Then she goes to the telephone: makes a movement as if to take it down but checks herself, shaking her head. She comes back to the sofa at last and flings herself down on it, fidgeting with the cushions and frowning. She is roused by the click of a latch as the French window in the inner room is softly opened, and Hilary Fairfield steps over the threshold. He is a big, fresh-colored man with gray hair and bowed shoulders. In speech and movements he is quick and jerky, inclined to be boisterous, but pathetically easy to check. This he knows himself and he has, indeed, an air of being always in rebellion against his own habit of obedience. He comes in, treading softly, his bright eyes dancing with excitement, like a child getting ready to spring a surprise on some one. Something in the fashion of the empty room (for he does not see Sydney crouching in the cushions) disconcerts him. He hesitates. The happy little smile fades. His eye wanders from one object to another and he moves about, recognizing a picture here, fingering there an unfamiliar hanging, as it were losing and finding himself a dozen times in his progress round the room. He comes to a stand at last before the fireplace, warming his hands. Then he takes out a pipe and with the other hand feels absently along the mantelpiece. Sydney, who has been watching him with a sort of breathless sympathy, says softly —*

SYDNEY

What are you looking for?

HILARY

They've moved my —

[*With a start.*]

Eh?

[*He turns sharply and sees her.*]

Meg! It's Meg!

[*With a rush.*]

Oh, my own darling!

SYDNEY

[*Her confidence in her power to deal with the situation suddenly gone.*]

I — I'm not Meg.

HILARY

[*Boisterously.*]

Not Meg! Tell me I don't know Meg!

[*Sydney gives a nervous schoolgirl giggle.*]

Eh?

[*Then, his voice changing completely.*]

No, it's not Meg.

[*Uneasily.*]

I beg your pardon. I thought you were — another girl. I've been away a long time.

SYDNEY

Whom do you want?

HILARY

[*Startled again.*]

There, you see, it's her voice too. Who are you?

SYDNEY

[*Fencing.*]

How did you get in?

HILARY

Tool-shed gate.

[*Louder.*]

Who are you?

SYDNEY

Where have you come from?

HILARY

Bedford. Took a car.

[*Lashing himself into an agitation.*]

Who are you?

SYDNEY

Whom do you want to see?

HILARY

[*Losing all control.*]

Who are you?

SYDNEY

[*Slowly.*]

I think I'm your daughter.

[*Hilary stares at her blankly. Then he bursts out laughing.*]

HILARY

Daughter! Daughter! By God, that's good! My

wife isn't my wife, she's my daughter! And my daughter's seventeen and I'm twenty-two.

SYDNEY

You're forgetting what years and years —

HILARY

Yes, of course. It's years and years. It's a lifetime. It's my daughter's lifetime. What's your name — daughter?

SYDNEY

Sydney.

HILARY

Sydney. Sydney, eh? My mother was Sydney. I like Sydney. I —

[*Catching at his dignity.*]

I suppose we're rather a shock to each other — Sydney?

SYDNEY

No. You're not a shock to me. But I'm afraid —

HILARY

[*Breaking in.*]

Is my — ? Is your — ? Where's Margaret?

SYDNEY

At church.

HILARY

Back soon, eh?

SYDNEY

Yes, that's why I'm afraid —

HILARY

[*Unheeding.*]

I might go to meet her, eh?

SYDNEY

[*Quickly.*]

Oh, I wouldn't. Come and sit down and wait for her and talk. Talk to me.

HILARY

[*Obediently.*]

Very well.

[*He sits down beside her on the sofa. They look at each other. He says shyly.*]

I say, isn't this queer?

SYDNEY

It makes me want to cry.

HILARY

Why? That's all over. Laugh! Laugh! That's the thing to do. What a lovely room this is. Though I can't say I like the new paper; *or* the curtains!

HILARY

[*Quickly.*]

Yes, I liked the old red one too —

[*Then, with an effort.*]

Those — aren't — the only changes. Everything changes —

HILARY

[*Swiftly.*]

Bet your Aunt Hester hasn't, eh?

[*They look at each other and laugh.*]

And I bet you — I say — is your mother such a darling still?

SYDNEY

[*Recalled to the business before her, brusquely.*]

Look here — father —

HILARY

[*Savoring it.*]

"Father! Father!" Well?

SYDNEY

We've got to talk. We've got to get things straight before she comes back.

HILARY

[*His eye and his attention beginning to wander.*]

Back soon — eh? Why has Meg moved the clock? It was much better where we put it. Must get it put back. Nearly one. She's late, isn't she? I — I really think, you know, I'll go out and meet your mother.

SYDNEY

[*Authoritatively.*]

You're to stay here.

HILARY

[*Beginning obediently.*]

Very well —

[*He flares suddenly.*]

I'll do as I like about that.

SYDNEY

[*Passionately.*]

I'll not have you frighten her.

HILARY

I?

[*He smiles securely.*]

SYDNEY

Can't you realize what the shock — ?

HILARY

[*Blissfully.*]

Never known any one die of joy yet!

SYDNEY

Father, you don't understand! You and mother —

HILARY

[*Getting irritated.*]

Look here, this is nothing to do with you —

SYDNEY

But you mustn't —

HILARY

[*Violently.*]

Now I tell you I'm not going to be hectored. I won't stand it. I've had enough of it. D'you hear? I've had enough of it.

SYDNEY

[*In the same tone.*]

If you talk to my mother like this —

HILARY

[*Softening.*]

Meg understands.

SYDNEY

[*Jealously.*]

So do I understand.

HILARY

I believe you do. You got wild all in a moment. That's my way too. It means nothing. Meg can't see that it means nothing. But it makes a man wild, you know, to be dragooned when he's as sane as — My God, I *am* sane! That's all over, isn't it? I *am* sane. Daughter!

SYDNEY

[*Watching him.*]

Father?

HILARY

Don't let me get — that way. It's bad. Help me to go slow. I'm as well as you are, you know. But it's new. It only happened to-day — like a curtain lifting.

[*Confidentially.*]

You see I was standing in the garden —

SYDNEY

I can't conceive how you got away.

HILARY

Led, like Peter, out of prison. I went through the gate, openly. Their eyes were blinded.

[*With a complete change of tone.*]

Pure luck, you know. There were visitors going out — and I nipped along with them, talking. No one spotted me. I wouldn't have believed it possible.

Heaps of us — of them, I mean — have tried, you know.

SYDNEY

But you'd no money.

HILARY

[*Whimsically.*]

I took the first taxi I saw. Promised him double. He's at the lower gate now, waiting to be paid.

SYDNEY

[*Jumping up.*]

Father, *dear!* Ticking away the tuppences! We're not millionaires!

HILARY

[*Carelessly.*]

Your mother'll see to it.

[*Sound of a motor horn.*]

That's him! I suppose he's got tired of waiting and come round.

SYDNEY

No, no! That'll be mother. You mustn't stop here. You must let me tell her. You must let me tell her first.

[*She goes out hurriedly.*]

HILARY

[*Shaken.*]

Your mother, is it? Your mother, eh? Here — child — a minute, give me a minute; give me a minute!

MARGARET

[*As she comes in.*]

No — he couldn't. But he's coming round directly after lunch — Hilary!

HILARY

[*Like a man who can't see.*]

Meg! Is it Meg? Meg, I've come home.

MARGARET

[*Terrified.*]

Sydney, don't go away!

SYDNEY

It's all right, mother!

HILARY

Meg!

MARGARET

But they said — they said — incurable. They shouldn't have said — incurable.

HILARY

What does it matter? I'm well. I'm well, Meg! I tell you — it came over me like a lantern flash — like a face turning to you. I was in the garden, you know — lost. I was a lost soul — outcast! No hope. I can never make any one understand. I was never like the rest of them. I was sane, always; but — the face was turned away.

SYDNEY

What face?

HILARY

The face of God.

MARGARET

Sydney — is he — ?

SYDNEY

It's all right, mother! That isn't madness. He's come to himself.

MARGARET

Then — then — what am I to do?

HILARY

What's that?

[*He comes nearer.*]

MARGARET

I — I—

HILARY

[*Staring at her.*]

You don't say a word. One would think you weren't glad to see me. Aren't you glad to see me?

MARGARET

Of course — glad — you poor Hilary!

HILARY

If you knew what it is to say to myself — I'm at home! That place — !

MARGARET

[*Mechanically.*]

Oh, but there was every comfort.

HILARY

Hell! Hell!

MARGARET

[*Insisting.*]

But they were good to you?

HILARY

Good enough.

MARGARET

[*In acute distress.*]

They didn't — ill treat —?

SYDNEY

Mother, you know you did the very best —

HILARY

If it had been heaven — what difference does it make? I was a dead man. Do you know what the dead do in heaven? They sit on their golden chairs and sicken for home. Why did you never come?

MARGARET

They wouldn't let me. It made you worse.

HILARY

Because I wanted you so.

MARGARET

But you didn't know me.

HILARY

My voice didn't — and my speech and my actions didn't. But *I* knew you. Meg — behind the curtain — behind the dreams and the noises, and the abandonment of God — I wanted you. I wanted — I wanted —

[*He puts his hand to his head.*]

Look here — we mustn't talk of these things. It's not safe, I tell you. When I talk I see a black hand reaching up through the floor — do you see? — there

— through the widening crack of the floor — to catch me by the ankle and drag — drag —

SYDNEY

Father — father — go slow!

MARGARET

[*Terrified.*]

Sydney!

SYDNEY

It's all right, mother! We'll manage.

HILARY

[*Turning to her.*]

Yes, you tell your mother. I'm all right! *You* understand that, don't you? Once it was a real hand. Now I know it's in my mind. I tell you, Meg, I'm well. But it's not safe to think back — yet. Not safe to think about anything but — Oh, my dear, the holly and the crackle of the fire and the snow like a veil of peace on me — and you like the snow — so still —

[*He comes to her with outstretched arms.*]

MARGARET

[*Faintly.*]

No — no — no — !

HILARY

[*Exalted.*]

Yes — yes — yes!

[*He catches her to him.*]

MARGARET

For pity's sake, Hilary — !

BASSETT

[*Entering.*]

Lunch is served, ma'am!

MARGARET

[*Helplessly.*]

Sydney —

SYDNEY

Lay an extra cover. This — my — this gentleman is staying to lunch.

HILARY

[*Boisterously.*]

Staying to lunch! to lunch! That's a good joke, isn't it? I say, listen! I'm laughing. Do you know, I'm laughing? It's blessed to laugh. Staying to lunch! Yes, my girl! Lunch and tea and supper and breakfast, thank God! and for many a long day!

CURTAIN

ACT II

The curtain rises on Margaret's drawing-room. It is prettily furnished in a gentle, white-walled, water-color-in-gold-frame fashion and is full of flowers. In one corner is a parrot in a cage, and near it Miss Fairfield's armchair and footstool and worktable. The fireplace has a white sheepskin in front of it, and brass fire irons; on the mantelpiece is a gilt clock and many photographs. At right angles to the fire a low Empire couch runs out into the room. There is a hint of Sydney in the ultra-modern cushionry with which it is piled. As the curtain goes up Bassett is showing in Gray Meredith.

BASSETT

They're still at lunch, sir.

GRAY

[*Glancing at the clock.*]

They're late.

BASSETT

It's the visitor, sir. He's kept them talking.

GRAY

Visitor?

BASSETT

Yes, sir, a strange gentleman. Will you take coffee, sir?

GRAY

I may as well go in and have it with them.

BASSETT

The mistress said, would you not, sir. She'd come to you.

GRAY

[*A little surprised.*]

Oh, very well.

BASSETT

I'll tell Miss Sydney you've come, sir.

GRAY

[*Lifting his eyebrows.*]

Tell Mrs. Fairfield.

BASSETT

Miss Sydney said I was to tell her too, sir, quietly.

GRAY

[*Puzzled.*]

Is — ?

[*He checks an impulse to question the servant.*]

All right!

BASSETT

Thank you, sir.

[*She goes out, leaving the door open. There is a slight pause. Margaret comes in hurriedly, shutting the door behind her.*]

GRAY

[*Smiling.*]

Well, what's the mystery?

MARGARET

Gray, he's come back!

GRAY

Who?

MARGARET

Hilary.

GRAY

[*Lightly.*]

Hilary? What Hilary?

[*Realizing.*]

Hilary!

MARGARET

Yes.

GRAY

Good God!

MARGARET

He got away. He came straight here. I found him with Sydney.

GRAY

Don't be frightened. I'm here. Is he dangerous?

MARGARET

No, no, poor fellow!

GRAY

You can't be sure. Anyway, I'd better take charge of him while you 'phone the asylum. No, that won't do, there are no trains. We must ring up the police.

MARGARET

Oh, no, Gray!

GRAY

It's not pleasant, but it's the only thing to do.

MARGARET

You don't understand.

GRAY

There's only one way to deal with an escaped lunatic.

MARGARET

But — he's not. He's well.

GRAY

What's that?

MARGARET

He's well. He knows me. He —

GRAY

I don't believe it.

MARGARET

Do you think I want to believe it? Oh, what a ghastly thing to say!

GRAY

This has nothing to do with you. He has nothing to do with you. Leave me to deal with him.

[*He goes toward the door.*]

MARGARET

Where are you going?

GRAY

'Phoning for Dr. Alliot to begin with.

MARGARET

Sydney's done that already.

GRAY

Sydney's head's on her shoulders.

MARGARET

He'll be here as soon as he can. He could always manage Hilary.

GRAY

You'd better go up to your room.

MARGARET

No.

GRAY

Don't take it too hard. It'll be over in an hour. We'll get him away quietly.

MARGARET

But it's no good, Gray, he's well. We've been on to the asylum already. They say we should have heard in a day or two even if he hadn't got away.

GRAY

Really well?

MARGARET

The old Hilary — voice and ways and — oh, my God, what am I to do?

GRAY

Do? You?

MARGARET

Don't you see? He knows nothing. His hair's gray and he talked as he talked at twenty. It's horrible.

GRAY

What do you mean, he knows nothing?

MARGARET

About the divorce. About you and me. He thinks it's all — as he left it.

GRAY

[*Incredulously.*]

You've said nothing?

MARGARET

He's like a lost child come home. Do you think I want to send him crazy again? He —

GRAY

[*With a certain anger.*]

You've said nothing?

MARGARET

Not yet.

GRAY

You'll come away with me at once.

MARGARET

I can't. I've got to think of Hilary.

GRAY

You've got to think of me.

MARGARET

I *am* you. But I've done him so much injury —

GRAY

You've done Fairfield injury? You little saint!

MARGARET

Saint? I'm a wicked woman. I'm wishing he hadn't got well. I'm wishing the doctors will say it's not true. In my wicked heart I'm calling down desolation on my own husband.

GRAY

You have no husband. You're marrying me in a week. You're mine.

MARGARET

I'm afraid —

GRAY

Whose are you? Answer me.

MARGARET

Yours.

GRAY

You know it?

MARGARET

I know it.

GRAY

Then never be afraid again.

MARGARET

No, not when you're here. I'm not afraid when you're here. But I must be good to Hilary. You see that?

GRAY

What "good" is good to him, poor devil?

MARGARET

At least I'll break it gently.

GRAY

Gently! That's just like a woman. All you can do for him is to come away now.

MARGARET

How can I? He's got to be told.

GRAY

Then let me tell him.

MARGARET

No, no! From you, just from you, it would be wanton. I won't have cruelty.

GRAY

We'll go straight up to town and get married at once. That'll settle everything.

MARGARET

You mustn't rush me. I've got to do what's right.

GRAY

It is right. There's nothing else to be done. You can't stay here.

MARGARET

No, I can't stay here. Don't let me stay here!

GRAY

Come with me. The car's outside. You say Alliot will be here in ten minutes. Leave him a note. He's an old friend as well as a doctor. Let him deal with it if you won't let me.

MARGARET

Oh, can't you see that I must tell Hilary myself?

GRAY

[*Angrily.*]

Women are incomprehensible!

MARGARET

It's men who are uncomprehending. Can't you feel that it'll hurt him less from me?

GRAY

It'll hurt him ten thousand times more.

MARGARET

But differently. It's the things one might have said

that fester. At least I'll spare him that torment. He shall say all he wants.

GRAY

[*Blackly.*]

I suppose the truth is that there's something in the best of women that enjoys a scene.

MARGARET

That's the first bitter thing you've ever said to me.

GRAY

[*Breaking out.*]

Can't you see what it does to me to know you are in the same house with him? For God's sake, come out of it!

MARGARET

[*Close to him.*]

I want to come, now, this moment. I want to be forced to come.

GRAY

That settles it.

MARGARET

[*Eluding him.*]

But I mustn't! Don't you see that I mustn't? I can't leave Sydney to lay my past for me.

GRAY

Your past is dead.

MARGARET

Its ghost's awake and walking.

HILARY'S VOICE

Meg! Meg!

MARGARET

[*Clinging to him.*]

Listen, it's calling to me.

HILARY'S VOICE

Meg, where are you?

MARGARET

It's too late! I'm too old! I shall never get away from him. I told you it was too good to be true.

GRAY

[*Deliberately matter-of-fact.*]

Listen to me! I am going home now. There are orders to be given. I must get some money and papers. But I shall be back here in an hour. I give you just that hour to tell him what you choose. After that you'll be ready to come.

MARGARET

If — if I've managed —

GRAY

There's no if. You're coming.

MARGARET

Am I coming, Gray?

HILARY

[*Entering from the hall.*]

Meg, Sydney said you'd gone to your room. Hullo! What's this? Who's this? Doctor, eh? I've been expecting them down on me.

[*To Gray.*]

It's no good, you know. I'm as fit as you are. Any test you like.

MARGARET

Mr. Meredith called to see me, Hilary! He's just going.

HILARY

Oh, sorry!

[*He walks to the fire and stands warming his hands, but watching them over his shoulder.*]

GRAY

[*At the door, in a low voice to Margaret.*]

I don't like leaving you.

MARGARET

You must! It's better! But — come back quickly!

GRAY

You'll be ready?

MARGARET

I will.

[*Gray goes out.*]

HILARY

[*Uneasily.*]

Who's that man?

MARGARET

His name's Gray Meredith.

HILARY

What's he doing here?

MARGARET

He's an old friend.

HILARY

I don't know him, do I?

MARGARET

It's since you were ill. It's the last five years.

HILARY

He's in love with you! I tell you, the man's in love with you! Do you think I'm so dazed and crazed I can't see that? You shouldn't let him, Meg! You're such a child you don't know what you're doing when you look and smile —

MARGARET

[*In a strained voice.*]

I do know.

[*She stands quite still in the middle of the room, her head lifted, a beautiful woman.*]

HILARY

[*Staring at her.*]

Lord, I don't wonder at him, poor brute!

[*Still staring.*]

Meg, you've changed.

MARGARET

[*Catching at the opening.*]

Yes, Hilary.

HILARY

Taller, more beautiful — and yet I miss something.

MARGARET

[*Urging him on.*]

Yes, Hilary!

HILARY

[*Wistfully.*]

Something you used to have — kind — a kind way with you — the child's got it. Sydney — my daughter, Sydney! She's more you than you are. You — you've grown right up — away — beyond me — haven't you?

MARGARET

Yes, Hilary.

HILARY

But I'm going to catch up. You'll help me to catch up with you — Meg?

[*She doesn't answer.*]

Meg! Wait for me! Meg, where are you? Why don't you hold out your hands?

MARGARET

[*Wrung for him.*]

I can't, Hilary! My hands are full.

HILARY

[*His tone lightening into relief.*]

What, Sydney? She'll be off in no time. She's told me about the boy — what's his name? Kit — already.

MARGARET

It's not Sydney.

HILARY

What?

[*Crescendo.*]

Eh? What are you driving at? What are you trying to tell me? What's changed you? Why do you look at me sideways? Why do you flinch when I speak

loudly? Yes — and when I kissed you — It's that man!

[*He goes up to her and takes her by the wrist, staring into her face.*]

Is it true? *You?*

MARGARET

[*Pitifully.*]

I've done nothing wrong. I'm trying to tell you. I only want to tell you and make you understand. Hilary, fifteen years is a long time —

HILARY

[*Dully.*]

Yes. I suppose it's a long time for a woman to be faithful.

MARGARET

That's it! That's the whole thing! If I'd loved you it wouldn't have been long —

HILARY

[*Violently, crying her down.*]

You did love me once.

MARGARET

[*Beaten.*]

Did I — once? I don't know —

[*There is a silence.*]

HILARY

[*Without expression.*]

What do you expect me to do? Forgive you?

MARGARET

[*Stung.*]

There's nothing to forgive.

[*Softening.*]

Oh, so much, Hilary, to forgive each other; but not that.

HILARY

[*More and more roughly as he loses control of himself.*]

Divorce you, then? Because I'll not do that! I'll have no dirty linen washed in the courts.

MARGARET

[*Forced into the open.*]

Hilary, I divorced you twelve months ago.

HILARY

[*Shouting.*]

What? what? what?

MARGARET

I divorced you —

HILARY

[*Beside himself.*]

You're mad! You couldn't do it! You'd no cause! D'you think I'm to be put off with your lies? Am I a child? You'd no cause! Oh, I see what you're at. You want to confuse me. You want to pull wool over my eyes. You want to drive me off my head — drive me mad again. You devil! You devil! You sha'n't do it. I've got friends — Sydney! where's that girl?

[*Shouting.*]

Sydney! Hester! All of you! Come here! Come here, I say!

[*Sydney opens the drawing-room door.*]

SYDNEY

Mother, what is it?

[*She enters, followed by Miss Fairfield. To Hilary.*]

What are you doing? You're frightening her.

HILARY

[*Wildly.*]

No, no! You're not on her side. You're little Sydney — kind — my Sydney! What did you say — go slow, eh? Keep your hand here — cool, cool.

[*Then as Sydney, breaking from him, makes a movement to her mother.*]

Stand away from that woman!

MARGARET

Sydney, humor him.

HILARY

[*At white heat.*]

What was I calling you for, eh? Oh, yes, a riddle. I've got a riddle for you. There was a man at that place — used to ask riddles — the moon told 'em to him. Just such a white face whispering out of the blue — Lies! He couldn't find the answers — sent him off his head. But I know the answer. When's a wife not a wife, eh? Want to know the answer?

[*Pointing to Margaret.*]

When she's *this — this — this!*

[*Confidentially.*]

She's poisoning me.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Now, Hilary! Hilary! —

HILARY

Sydney, come here! I'll tell *you.*

[*Sydney stands torn between the two.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

What have you done to him, Margaret?

MARGARET

I've told him the truth.

MISS FAIRFIELD

God forgive you!

HILARY

[*Raving.*]

I tell you she's pouring poison into my ear. You remember that fellow in the play — and *his* wife? That's what she's done. If I told you what she said to me, you'd think I was mad. And that's what she wants you to think. She wants to get rid of me. She's got a tame cat about the place. I'm in the way. And so she comes to me, d'you see, and tells me — what do you think? She says she's not my wife. What do you think of that?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Grimly.*]

You may well ask.

MARGARET

[*To Sydney.*]

He won't listen —

SYDNEY

Sit down, darling! You're shaking.

MARGARET

He's always had these rages. It's my fault. I began at the wrong end. Hilary — it's not — I'm not what you think.

HILARY

Then what was that man doing in my house?

MARGARET

In a week I'm going to marry him.

HILARY

D'you hear her? To *me* she says this! Is she mad or am I?

MARGARET

[*Desperately.*]

I tell you there's been a law passed —

MISS FAIRFIELD

No need for him to know that now, Margaret!

SYDNEY

Of course he has to know.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Not now.

MARGARET

[*On the defensive.*]

I don't know what you mean, Aunt Hester!

MISS FAIRFIELD

Let us rather thank God that he has come back in time.

MARGARET

[*Uneasy.*]

In time? In time?

MISS FAIRFIELD

To snatch a brand from the burning.

MARGARET

I'm a free woman. I've got my divorce.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Whom God hath joined let no man put asunder.

MARGARET

[*At bay.*]

I'm a free woman. I'm going to marry Gray Meredith. This is a trap! Sydney!

MISS FAIRFIELD

Is this talk for a young girl to hear?

MARGARET

Sydney, you're to fetch Gray.

HILARY

[*With weak violence.*]

If he comes here I'll kill him.

MARGARET

[*Catching Sydney back.*]

No, no! D'you hear him? Oh, what am I to do?

SYDNEY

It's all right, mother! We'll manage somehow.

BASSETT

[*Entering.*]

Dr. Alliot is in the hall, ma'am.

MARGARET

[*With a gasp of relief.*]

Ask him to come in here. At once.

[*Dr. Alliot trots in. He is a pleasant, roundabout, clean little old man, with a twinkling face and brisk, chubby movements of the hands. He is upright and his voice is strong. He wears his seventy odd years like a good joke that he expects you to keep up, in spite of the fact that he is really your own age and understands you better than you do yourself. But behind his comfortable manner is a hint of authority which has its effect, especially on Hilary.*]

DR. ALLIOT

What's all this I hear? Well, well! Good afternoon, Mrs. Fairfield! Good afternoon, Miss Fairfield! Merry Christmas, Sydney! Now then, now for him! Welcome back, Fairfield! Welcome back, my boy!

HILARY

It's — it's — old Alliot, isn't it?

DR. ALLIOT

Your memory's all right, I see.

HILARY

I suppose they've sent for you —

DR. ALLIOT

Well, well, you see, you've arrived rather unconventionally. I've been in touch with —

HILARY

That place?

DR. ALLIOT

Why, yes! You may have to go back, you know! Formalities! Formalities!

HILARY

I don't mind. I'm well. I'm well, Alliot! I'm not afraid of what you'll say. I'm not afraid of any of you.

DR. ALLIOT

Well, well, well! that sounds hopeful.

HILARY

But I can't go yet, doctor.

DR. ALLIOT

Only for a day or two.

HILARY

It's my wife. I lost my temper. I do lose my temper. It means nothing. Go slow, eh? My wife's ill, doctor. She's not right in her head.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Alert.*]

Ah!

HILARY

[*With a wave of his hand.*]

So are the rest of them. Mad as hatters.

DR. ALLIOT

H'm!

HILARY

[*Checked, glances at him keenly a moment. Then chuckling.*]

Oh, you're thinking that's a delusion.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Humoring him.*]

Between you and me, it's a common one.

HILARY

[*Half flattered.*]

Ah, we know, don't we? Served in the same shop, eh? Only the counter between us.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Feeling his way.*]

Well, well —

HILARY

But look here! She says she's not my wife.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Enlightened.*]

Oh! Oh, that's the trouble!

HILARY

She says she's not my wife.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Soberly.*]

It's a hard case, Fairfield.

HILARY

What d'you mean by that?

DR. ALLIOT

It's the old wisdom of the scapegoat — it is expedient — how does it go? expedient — ?

SYDNEY

"It is expedient that one man should die for the people."

DR. ALLIOT

That's it! A hard word, but a true one.

HILARY

What has that got to do with me?

DR. ALLIOT

Well, the situation is this —

HILARY

There is no situation. I married Meg. I fell ill. Now I'm well again. I want my wife.

DR. ALLIOT

Why, yes — yes —

HILARY

[*Picking it up irritably.*]

" Yes — yes — Yes — yes —" I suppose that's what you call humoring a lunatic.

DR. ALLIOT

Why, I hope to be convinced, Fairfield, that that trouble's over, but —

HILARY

But you're going to lock me up again because I want my wife.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Patiently.*]

Will you let me put the case to you?

HILARY

You can put fifty cases. It makes no difference.

SYDNEY

[*At his elbow, softly.*]

Father, I'd listen.

HILARY

[*Slipping his arm through hers.*]

Eh? Sydney? That you? You're not against me, Sydney?

SYDNEY

Nobody's against you. We only want you to listen.

HILARY

Well, out with it!

DR. ALLIOT

D'you remember — can you throw your mind back to the beginning of the agitation against the marriage laws? No, you were a schoolboy —

HILARY

Deceased wife's sister, eh? That's the law that lets a man marry his sister-in-law and won't let a woman marry her brother-in-law. Pretty good, that, for *your* side of the counter.

DR. ALLIOT

Well, well, that hardly matters now.

HILARY

It shows what your rotten, muddle-headed laws are worth, anyhow.

SYDNEY

[*Pressing his arm.*]

Father!

HILARY

All right! Go ahead! Go ahead!

DR. ALLIOT

Well, as the result of that agitation — and remember, Hilary, what thousand, thousand tragedies must have had voice in such an outcry — a commission was appointed to inquire into the working of the divorce laws. It made its report, recommended certain drastic reforms, and there, I suppose, as is the way with commissions, would have been the end of it, if it hadn't been for the war — and the war marriages.

HILARY

[*Lowering.*]

So that's where I come in! Margaret, is that where I come in?

DR. ALLIOT

Never, I suppose, in one decade were there so many *young* marriages. Happy? That's another thing! Marry in haste —

MARGARET

They weren't all happy.

DR. ALLIOT

But they were *young,* those boys and girls who married. As young as Kit, and as impatient as Sydney. And that saved them. That young, young generation found out, out of their own unhappiness, the war taught them, what peace couldn't teach us — that when conditions are evil it is not your duty to submit — that when conditions are evil, your duty, in spite of

protests, in spite of sentiment, your duty, though you trample on the bodies of your nearest and dearest to do it, though you bleed your own heart white, your duty is to see that those conditions are changed. If your laws forbid you, you must change your laws. If your church forbids you, you must change your church. And if your God forbids you, why then, you must change your God.

MISS FAIRFIELD

And we who will not change?

MARGARET

Or cannot change — ?

DR. ALLIOT

Stifle. Like a snake that can't cast its skin. Grow or perish — it's the law of life. And so, when this young generation — yours, not mine, Hilary — decided that the marriage laws were, I won't say evil, but outgrown, they set to work to change them.

MISS FAIRFIELD

You needn't think it was without protest, Hilary. I joined the anti-divorce league myself.

DR. ALLIOT

No, it wasn't without protest. Mrs. Grundy and the churches are protesting still. But in spite of protest, no man or woman to-day is bound to a drunkard, an habitual criminal, or —

HILARY

Or — ?

DR. ALLIOT

Or to a partner who, as far as we doctors know —

HILARY

But you can't be sure!

DR. ALLIOT

I say as far as we know, is incurably insane — in practice, is insane for more than five years.

HILARY

And if he recovers? Look at me!

DR. ALLIOT

[*With a sigh.*]

" It is expedient —"

HILARY

And you call that justice!

MARGARET

At least call it mercy. All the days of your life to stand at the window, Hilary, and watch the sun shining on the other side of the road — it's hard, it's hard on a woman.

DR. ALLIOT

At least call it common sense. If a man can't live his normal life, it's as if he were dead. If he's an incurable drunkard, if he's shut away for life in prison —

HILARY

But I'm not a drunkard. I'm not a convict. I've done nothing. I've been to the war, to fight, for her, for all of you, for my country, for this law-making machine that I've called my country. And when I've

got from it, not honorable scars, not medals and glory, but sixteen years in hell, then when I get out again, then the country I've fought for, the laws I've fought for, the woman I've fought for, they say to me —" As you've done without her for seventeen years you can do without her altogether." That's what it is. When I was helpless they conspired behind my back to take away all I had from me.

[*To Margaret.*]

Did I ever hurt you? Didn't I love you? Didn't you love me? Could I help being ill? What have I done?

SYDNEY

You died, father.

MARGARET

Sydney, don't be cruel.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Ah, we cry after the dead, but I've always wondered what their welcome back would be.

HILARY

Well, you know now.

DR. ALLIOT

I don't say it isn't hard —

HILARY

Ah, you don't say it isn't hard! That's good of you. That's sympathy indeed. And my wife — she's full of it, too, isn't she? " Poor dear! I was married to him once. I'd quite forgotten."

MARGARET

For pity's sake, Hilary —

DR. ALLIOT

Why, face it, man! One of you must suffer. Which is it to be? The useful or the useless? the whole or the maimed? the healthy woman with her life before her, or the man whose children ought never to have been born?

HILARY

[*In terrible appeal.*]

Margaret!

SYDNEY

Is that true, Dr. Alliot? Is that true?

MARGARET

[*Her voice shaking.*]

I think you go too far.

DR. ALLIOT

Mrs. Fairfield, in this matter I cannot go too far.

MISS FAIRFIELD

For me, at any rate — too far and too fast altogether! Before ladies! It's not nice. It's enough to call down a judgment.

BASSETT

[*Entering.*]

Mr. Pumphrey to see you, ma'am.

[*To Sydney.*]

And Mr. Kit.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Justified.*]

Ah!

MARGARET

I can't see any one.

BASSETT

He said, ma'am, it was important.

HILARY

Who? Who?

MISS FAIRFIELD

The rector. I expect he's heard about you.

HILARY

I can't see him. I won't see him. Let me go. I've met the Levites. Spare me the priest.

[*He breaks away from them and goes stumbling out at the other door.*]

SYDNEY

[*Following him anxiously.*]

Father!

DR. ALLIOT

[*Preventing her.*]

No, no, my child! I'll look after him.

[*He goes out quickly.*]

[*The Rector is an insignificant man with an important manner and a plum in his mouth. He enters with Kit who is flushed and perturbed.*]

RECTOR

Ah, good afternoon, Mrs. Fairfield — Miss Fairfield —

MARGARET

[*Mechanically. She is very tired and inattentive.*]

A happy Christmas, Mr. Pumphrey!

RECTOR

Ah! Just so! Christmas afternoon. An unusual day to call, Mrs. Fairfield, and, I fear, an inconvenient hour —

MARGARET

Not at all, Mr. Pumphrey.

RECTOR

I can give myself —

[*He takes out his watch.*]

— till three-fifteen, no longer. The children's service is at three-thirty.

MARGARET

[*Turning to the bell.*]

Mayn't I order you an early cup of tea?

RECTOR

Thank you, thank you, no. Busy as I am, I should not have disturbed you —

MISS FAIRFIELD

Rector, it is as if you had been sent!

RECTOR

Ah! gratifying! I did not see you at morning service, Miss Fairfield. But last night — *late* last night —

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*With a look at Sydney.*]

Three A.M., rector?

RECTOR

Three-fifteen, Miss Fairfield.

KIT

Look here, father —

RECTOR

I received certain information from my son —

KIT

No, you don't, father. I'll have my say first. It's just this, Mrs. Fairfield —

RECTOR

[*Fussed.*]

Christopher? Christopher?

KIT

[*He is very much in earnest and he addresses himself solely to Margaret.*]

I want you to know that it is nothing to do with me, Mrs. Fairfield. I don't agree with my father.

[*Confidentially.*]

You wouldn't think it, but I never do.

RECTOR

Christopher?

KIT

[*Ignoring him.*]

And it was only coming up the drive that he sprung on me why he wanted to see you, or I wouldn't have come —

MARGARET

[*Liking him.*]

I think Sydney would have been sorry, Kit.

KIT

[*With a touch of his father's manner.*]

Yes, well, Sydney and I have talked it over — and I know I'm going into the church myself — but I think he's all wrong, Mrs. Fairfield.

[*Unconscious of plagiarism.*]

I'm not nineteenth century.

[*But Sydney giggles.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

Rector, what's the matter with the young man?

KIT

[*Forging ahead.*]

You see, I'm pretty keen about Sydney, and so, naturally, I'm pretty keen about you, Mrs. Fairfield —

RECTOR

Miss Fairfield, I'm without words.

KIT

[*Burdened.*]

— and I just wanted to tell you that I can't tell you what I think of my father over this business. It makes me wild.

SYDNEY

Kit, you'd better shut up.

KIT

[*Turning to Sydney.*]

Well, I only wanted her to understand that I'm not responsible for my father — that he's not my own choice, if you know what I mean —

[*They talk aside.*]

RECTOR

His mother's right hand! I don't know what's come over him!

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Grimly.*]

A pretty face, rector!

RECTOR

Ah! the very point! I shall be glad to see you alone, Mrs. Fairfield — not you, of course, Miss Fairfield, but — er —

[*He glances at Kit and Sydney.*]

MARGARET

[*Resignedly.*]

Sydney, have you shown Kit all your presents?

SYDNEY

[*Reluctantly taking the hint, but continuing the conversation as they go out.*]

What did you let him *come* for? Oh, you're no good!

[*The door bangs behind them.*]

MARGARET

[*Half smiling.*]

Well, Mr. Pumphrey, I suppose it's about Sydney and Kit?

RECTOR

Mrs. Fairfield, until last night we encouraged, we were gratified —

MARGARET

Last night? Oh, the dance!

RECTOR

I sat up for my son until three-fifteen of Christmas morning. His excuse was your daughter —

MARGARET

[*With dignity.*]

Do you take objection to Sydney, Mr. Pumphrey?

RECTOR

Now, my dear lady, you mustn't misunderstand me —

MARGARET

[*Quietly.*]

To me, then?

RECTOR

Mrs. Fairfield, I beg — ! But in the course of a slight — er — altercation between Christopher and myself it transpired —

MARGARET

[*She has been prepared for it.*]

I see. It's her father —

RECTOR

I am grieved — grieved for you.

MARGARET

But his illness was no secret.

RECTOR

My heart, Mrs. Fairfield, and Mrs. Pumphrey's heart, has gone out to you in your affliction. When the light of reason —

MARGARET

Then you did know. *Then* I don't follow,

RECTOR

But according to Christopher —

MARGARET

Well?

RECTOR

Mrs. Fairfield, is your husband alive or dead?

MARGARET

My former husband is alive.

RECTOR

[*With a half deprecating, half triumphant gesture.*]

Out of your own mouth, Mrs. Fairfield —

MARGARET

[*Bewildered.*]

But you say you knew he was insane?

RECTOR

But I didn't know he was alive.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Irritated.*]

Don't be so foolish, Margaret. It's not the insanity, it's the divorce.

RECTOR

When I realized that I had been within a week of remarrying a divorced person.

MARGARET

[*Coldly.*]

Why didn't you go to Mr. Meredith?

RECTOR

Mr. Meredith is — er — a difficult man to — er —

approach. I felt that an appeal to your feelings — as a Christian, as a mother —

MARGARET

You mean you'll prevent Kit marrying Sydney —?

RECTOR

It depends on you, Mrs. Fairfield. I won't let him marry the child of a woman who remarries while her husband is alive.

MARGARET

But the church allows it?

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Correcting her.*]

Winks at it, Margaret.

RECTOR

[*With dignity.*]

"Winks" is hardly the word —

MARGARET

Then what word would you use, Mr. Pumphrey?

RECTOR

I am not concerned with words —

MARGARET

But I want to know. I care about my church. It lets me and it doesn't let me — what does it mean?

RECTOR

[*Much moved.*]

I am not concerned with meanings, Mrs. Fairfield. I am concerned with my own conscience.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Margaret — you've no business to upset the rector. Why don't you tell him that the situation has changed?

MARGARET

Nothing has changed.

RECTOR

Changed?

MISS FAIRFIELD

My nephew has recovered — returned. He's in the house now.

RECTOR

Providence! It's Providence!

[*With enthusiasm.*]

I never knew anything like Providence. Changed indeed, Miss Fairfield! My objection goes. Dear little Sydney! Ah, Mrs. Fairfield, in a year you and your husband will look back on this — episode as on a dream — a bad dream —

MARGARET

[*Stonily.*]

I have no husband.

RECTOR

Ah! the remarriage — a mere formality —

MISS FAIRFIELD

Simpler still — the decree can be rescinded.

MARGARET

[*Stunned.*]

Aunt Hester, knowing his history, knowing mine, is it possible that you expect me to go back to him?

MISS FAIRFIELD

He's come back to you.

RECTOR

A wife's duty —

MARGARET

[*Slowly.*]

I think you're wicked. I think you're both wicked.

RECTOR

Mrs. Fairfield!

MISS FAIRFIELD

Control yourself, Margaret!

MARGARET

[*With a touch of wildness in her manner.*]

You — do you love your wife?

RECTOR

Mrs. Fairfield!

MARGARET

Do you?

RECTOR

Mrs. Pumphrey and I — most attached —

MARGARET

Suppose you weren't. Think of it — to want so desperately to feel — and to feel nothing. Do you know what it means to dread a person who loves you? To stiffen at the look in their eyes? To pity and — shudder? You should not judge.

[*Hilary, unseen, opens the doors and shuts it again quickly.*]

RECTOR

I — I —

MISS FAIRFIELD

There it is, you see, rector! She doesn't care what she says.

[*Dr. Alliot enters.*]

DR. ALLIOT

[*Gravely, holding the door behind him.*]

Margaret, my child —

[*He sees the others and his voice changes.*]

Hullo, Pumphrey! You here still? Well, well — you're cutting it fine.

RECTOR

The service!

[*He pulls out his watch, stricken.*]

DR. ALLIOT

I'll run you down there, if you'll wait a minute.

[*To Margaret, privately, poking a wise forefinger.*]

What you want, my child, is a good cry and a cup of tea.

RECTOR

[*Coming up to Margaret, stiffly.*]

Good day, Mrs. Fairfield! You will not — reconsider —

MARGARET

I will not.

RECTOR

I regret — I regret —

[*To Miss Fairfield.*]

My dear lady, you have my sympathy. I think I left my hat —

[*Miss Fairfield escorts him into the hall.*]

DR. ALLIOT

Hilary's coming home with me, Margaret. He wants a word with you first. Can you manage that?

MARGARET

Of course.

DR. ALLIOT

[*Abruptly.*]

Where's Meredith?

MARGARET

[*Eagerly.*]

He's coming. He's taking me away.

DR. ALLIOT

Good. The sooner the better.

RECTOR

[*Reappearing at the door.*]

Dr. Alliot — it now wants seven minutes to the half.

DR. ALLIOT

Coming! Coming! See now — you can be gentle with him —

MARGARET

Of course.

DR. ALLIOT

[*With a keen look at her.*]

Nor yet too gentle. Well, well, God be with you, child!

[*He trots out.*]

[*Hilary comes in, hesitating. If he is without dignity he is nevertheless too much like a hectored, forlorn child to be ludicrous.*]

HILARY

Have they gone?

[*Reassuring her.*]

It's all right. I'm going too.

[*He waits for her to answer. She says nothing.*]

I'm going. I've got to. I see that. He's made me see.

MARGARET

Dr. Alliot?

HILARY

I'm going to stay with him till I can look round. He's going to make it right with — that place.

MARGARET

I'm glad you've got a good friend, Hilary.

HILARY

Yes, he's a good chap. He's talked to me. He's made me see.

[*He comes a little closer.*]

He says — and I do see — it's too late, of course —

[*His look at her is a petition, but she makes no sign.*]

— isn't it?

[*He comes nearer.*]

Yes — it's too late. It wouldn't be fair to — to ask you —

[*Again the look.*]

— would it?

MARGARET

[*Imploringly.*]

Oh, Hilary! Hilary!

HILARY

[*Encouraged to come closer.*]

No woman could be expected — you couldn't be expected —

[*She makes no sign.*]

Could you?

[*Repeating his lesson.*]

It's what he says — you've made a new life for yourself —

[*He waits.*]

Haven't you? There's no room in it — for me — is there?

[*He is close to her. She does not move.*]

So it's just a case of — saying good-by and going, because — because — I quite see — there's no chance —

[*Suddenly he throws himself down beside her, catching at her hands, clinging to her knees.*]

Oh! Meg, Meg, Meg, isn't there just a chance?

MARGARET

[*Faintly.*]

Hilary, I can't stand it.

HILARY

[*And from now to the end of the scene, he is at full pelt, tumbling over his words, frantic.*]

Yes, but listen to me! Listen to me! You don't listen. Listen to me! I've been alone so long —

MARGARET

Gray! Gray! Why don't you come?

HILARY

I'll not trouble you. I'll not get in your way — but — don't leave me all alone. Give me something — the rustle of your dress, the cushion where you've lain — your voice about the house. You can't deny me such little things, that you give your servants and your dog.

MARGARET

It's madness —

HILARY

It's naked need!

MARGARET

What good should I be to you? I don't love you, Hilary — poor Hilary. I love him. I never think of anything but him.

HILARY

But it's me you married. You promised — you promised — better or worse — in sickness in health. You can't go back on your promise.

MARGARET

[*Helpless.*]

It isn't fair.

HILARY

Anything's fair. You don't know what misery means.

MARGARET

I'm learning.

HILARY

But you don't *know*. You couldn't leave me to it if you knew. Why, I've never known you hurt a creature in all your life! Remember the rat hunts in the barn, the way we used to chaff you? and the starling? and the kitten you found? Why, I've seen you step aside for a little creeping green thing on the path. You've never hurt anything. Then how can you hurt me so? You can't have changed since yesterday —

MARGARET

[*In despairing protest.*]

It's half my life ago —

HILARY

It's yesterday, it's yesterday!

MARGARET

[*With the fleeting courage of a half caught bird.*]

Yes, it is yesterday. It's how you took me — yesterday — and now you're doing it again!

HILARY

[*Catching at the hope of it.*]

Am I? Am I? Is it yesterday — yesterday come back again?

MARGARET

[*In the toils.*]

No — no! Hilary, I can't!

HILARY

[*At white heat.*]

No, you can't. You can't leave me. You can't do

it to me. You can't drive me out — the wilderness — alone — alone — alone. You can't do it, Meg — you can't do it — you can't!

MARGARET

[*Beaten.*]

I suppose — I can't.

HILARY

You — you'll stay with me?

[*Breaking down utterly.*]

Oh, God bless you, Meg, God bless you, God bless you —

[*She resigns her hands to him while she sits, flattened against the back of her chair, quivering a little, like a crucified moth.*]

MARGARET

[*Puzzling it out.*]

You mean — God help me!

CURTAIN

ACT III

The scene is the same as in Act I. Miss Fairfield sits knitting. Sydney is fidgeting about the room. Bassett comes in and begins to lay the cloth. Kit, who enters unseen behind her, sees Miss Fairfield and makes hastily up the stairs on tiptoe.

SYDNEY

[*Turning.*]

Oh, Bassett, isn't it rather soon for tea? Lunch was so late.

BASSETT

[*Desisting.*]

Oh, very well, miss.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Now, Sydney! Always trying to upset things. I'm more than ready for my tea. Bring it in at once, Bassett.

BASSETT

Very well, ma'am.

SYDNEY

Auntie, I know mother won't want to be disturbed.

MISS FAIRFIELD

It's high time she was. Talk! Talk! No consideration. She'll tire Hilary out.

[*She goes toward the drawing-room.*]

SYDNEY

[*Worried.*]

Auntie, I think —

MISS FAIRFIELD

Then you shouldn't!

[*She goes out.*]

BASSETT

Shall I bring in tea, Miss Sydney?

SYDNEY

[*With a twinkle.*]

I think we'll wait half an hour.

BASSETT

[*With an answering twinkle.*]

Very well, miss.

SYDNEY

Oh — Bassett — tell Mr. Kit that — er — that the coast's clear.

BASSETT

He didn't stay out with us, miss. Him and the puppy together was a bit too much for cook, with the turkey on her hands.

[*Looking round.*]

He's here somewhere, miss.

[*She goes out.*]

SYDNEY

[*Addressing space.*]

Kit, you idiot, come out!

KIT

[*Appearing at the head of the stairs.*]

I spend half my life dodging your aunt.

[*As he runs downstairs he rakes a bunch of mistletoe from the top of a picture.*]

She spoilt the whole effect this morning, but now —

[*He advances upon Sydney.*]

SYDNEY

[*Enjoying herself.*]

What do you want now?

KIT

[*Chanting.*]

"The mistletoe hung in the old oak hall!"—

SYDNEY

[*Eluding him.*]

Shut up, Kit!

[*They dodge and scuffle like two puppies till the drawing-room door opens, letting in a sound of voices.*]

KIT

Sst!

[*He dashes up the stairs and comes down again much more soberly as Sydney says over her shoulder.*]

SYDNEY

It's only mother.

[*Margaret comes dragging into the room, shutting the door behind her.*]

SYDNEY

[*The laughter dying out of her.*]

Oh, mother, how white you look!

MARGARET

Has Kit gone?

SYDNEY

No, but I can get rid of him if you want me to.

MARGARET

I want him to wait. I want him to take a letter for me to Gray.

SYDNEY

Do you want Gray to come here?

MARGARET

I want him not to come here.

SYDNEY

Oh, I see, not till after father's gone.

MARGARET

He's not going.

SYDNEY

Mother!

[*Margaret looks at her with twitching lips.*]

SYDNEY

Mother, you haven't —

MARGARET

I can't talk to you now, Sydney.

SYDNEY

But mother —

MARGARET

Please.

SYDNEY

But mother —

MARGARET

Ask Kit to wait a few minutes.

SYDNEY

But —

[*Margaret goes into the inner room and sits down to write at a little desk near the window. Her back is turned to them and she is soon absorbed in her letter. Sydney stands deep in thought.*]

KIT

[*At the foot of the stairs.*]

All serene?

[*Sydney makes no answer. Kit prances up behind her with the bunch of mistletoe.*]

KIT

[*Repeating his success.*]

"The mistletoe hung in the old oak hall!"

SYDNEY

[*Violently.*]

Oh, for God's sake, stop it!

KIT

[*Quenched.*]

What's the row?

SYDNEY

You never know when to stop.

KIT

Well, you needn't snap out at a person —

SYDNEY

[*Impulsively.*]

Sorry! Oh, sorry, old man! I'm jumpy to-day.

KIT

[*Chaffing her.*]

Nervy old thing!

SYDNEY

[*Stricken.*]

I — I suppose I am.

KIT

One minute you're as nice as pie, and then you fizz up like a Seidlitz powder, all about nothing.

SYDNEY

All about nothing. Sorry, my old Kit, sorry!

[*She flings herself down on the sofa. Then, with an effort.*]

Come and talk. What's the news?

KIT

I told you it all this morning. What's yours?

SYDNEY

I like yours better. How's the pamphlet going?

KIT

Nearly done. I put in all your stuff.

SYDNEY

[*Absently.*]

Good.

KIT

Though you know I don't agree with it. What I feel is — you're not listening.

SYDNEY

[*Slowly.*]

Kit, talking of that paper — I read somewhere — suppose now — is it true it can skip a generation?

KIT

It? What?

SYDNEY

Oh — any illness. Suppose — *you,* for instance — suppose you were a queer family — a little, you know. And say your mother was queer — and you weren't. You were perfectly fit, you understand, perfectly fit —

KIT

Well?

SYDNEY

What about the children?

KIT

I wouldn't risk it. Thank the Lord your father's only shell shock.

[*Sydney makes as if to answer and checks herself. Then —*]

SYDNEY

But isn't there a school that says there's no such thing as heredity?

KIT

Well, all I know is I wouldn't risk it.

SYDNEY

It — it's hard on people.

KIT

My word, yes. They say that's why old Alliot never married.

SYDNEY

[*High and mightily.*]

Oh, village gossip.

KIT

[*Apologetically.*]

Well, you know what the mater is.

SYDNEY

[*Abandoning her dignity.*]

Who was it, Kit?

KIT

Old Miss Robson.

SYDNEY

Rot!

KIT

Fact.

SYDNEY

But she's all right.

KIT

Had a game sister.

SYDNEY

Of course! I just remember her. She used to scare me.

KIT

Oh, it must be true. They're such tremendous pals still.

SYDNEY

Poor old things!

KIT

Rotten for her.

SYDNEY

Rottener for him! What did she go on being pals with him for?

KIT

Why shouldn't she?

SYDNEY

Well, it stopped him marrying any one else. She oughtn't to have let him.

KIT

You can't stop a person being fond of you.

SYDNEY

When it's a man you can.

KIT

My dear girl, you don't know what you're talking about.

SYDNEY

My dear boy, if a girl finds out she can't marry a man, it's up to her to choke him off.

KIT

Rot!

SYDNEY

Well, I think so.

KIT

Couldn't be done.

SYDNEY

Couldn't it just?

KIT

Any man would see through it.

SYDNEY

As if any man ever saw through anything.

KIT

We're not all fools where women are concerned.

SYDNEY

I admire your air of conviction.

KIT

Don't be clever-clever, old thing. Be —

[*His arm slips around her.*]

SYDNEY

[*Edging away.*]

Don't.

KIT

[*He glances round hastily at Margaret, but she is deep in writing.*]

Why not?

SYDNEY

[*Deliberately.*]

I hate being pawed.

[*A pause.*]

KIT

Look here, Sydney, d'you call this a way of spending Christmas afternoon?

SYDNEY

[*Her lip quivering.*]

It isn't much of a way, is it?

KIT

Well, then, old thing!

[*Again the arm.*]

SYDNEY

[*Icily.*]

I told you to leave me alone.

KIT

[*Rising, huffed.*]

Oh, well, if you can't be decent, I'm going.

SYDNEY

[*Sweetly.*]

Counterattraction?

KIT

[*Wheeling round on her.*]

Now, my dear old thing, look here! I know it's only a way you've got into; but when you say — "men!"— with a sort of sneer, and "counterattraction" like that, in that voice, it just sounds cheap. I hate it. It's not like you. I wish you wouldn't.

SYDNEY

Dear me!

KIT

Now I suppose you're annoyed.

SYDNEY

Oh, no, I'm only amused.

KIT

[*Heavily.*]

There's nothing amusing about me, Sydney. I'm in earnest.

SYDNEY

I'm sure you are. You got out of answering an innocent little question quite neatly. It looks like practice.

KIT

[*Harried.*]

Now, look here, Sydney, I swear to you —

SYDNEY

[*Like the ghost in "Hamlet."*]

Swear!

KIT

If you're thinking of Alice Hewitt I've only met her four times.

SYDNEY

Oh, so her name's Alice!

KIT

Didn't you know?

SYDNEY

Never heard of her till this minute.

KIT

Then what on earth have you been driving at?

SYDNEY

Trying an experiment.

KIT

If it's because you're jealous —

SYDNEY

Jealous! Jealous of a — What color are her eyes?

KIT

[*Carelessly.*]

How'd I know?

SYDNEY

[*With a sudden spurt of suspicion.*]

Kit! What color are mine?

KIT

[*Helplessly.*]

Oh, er — oh —

SYDNEY

[*Terribly.*]

Kit! What color are mine?

[*Relenting.*]

Look at my frock, you donkey! What do you suppose I wear blue for? So Alice has got blue eyes?

KIT

How do you know?

SYDNEY

I know you, Kit. You're conservative.

KIT

As a matter of fact, she isn't unlike you. That's what made me talk to her.

SYDNEY

Oh, you've talked to her!

KIT

[*Warming.*]

Oh, yes! — quite a lot. She's a friend of my sister's.

SYDNEY

She always is.

KIT

What d'you mean—"she always is"? I tell you I've only met her four times. I can't make you out.

SYDNEY

No?

KIT

I wish I could make you out.

SYDNEY

[*An ache in her voice.*]

Oh, I wish you could.

KIT

[*Responding instantly.*]

I say, old thing, is anything really the matter?

SYDNEY

[*With a glance at Margaret.*]

I'm worried.

KIT

Oh, that! Yes, it's beastly for your mother.

SYDNEY

Oh, it's not that. At least—

KIT

What?

SYDNEY

[*Lightly.*]

Oh, I don't know.

KIT

[*Puzzled.*]

Can't you tell me?

SYDNEY

No, old man.

KIT

[*As in Act I.*]

But — look here — marriage has got to be a sort of mutual show, hasn't it? Confidence, and all that?

[*Sydney goes off into a peal of laughter.*]

KIT

What's the matter now?

SYDNEY

Do you preach this sort of sermon to Alice?

KIT

Sydney — that's — that's rude — that's — that's —

SYDNEY

Take time, darling!

KIT

You're being simply insulting.

SYDNEY

Too bad! I should go and tell Alice.

KIT

Damn Alice!

SYDNEY

Oh, no, Kit, she's got blue eyes.

KIT

[*Storming.*]

Look here, what's up?

SYDNEY

Nix.

KIT

Have you really got your back up? What's the matter with you, Sydney?

SYDNEY

D'you want to know?

KIT

[*With a certain dignity.*]

I think I'd better.

SYDNEY

Well, it's —

[*Yawning.*]

"Jam to-morrow, jam yesterday, but —" surely you know how it ends.

KIT

I don't. And I don't want to.

SYDNEY

[*Drearily.*]

But never jam to-day.

KIT

[*Startled.*]

Why, Sydney!

SYDNEY

[*Recovering herself, lightly.*]

D'you know what that's out of?

KIT

No.

SYDNEY

[*Mischievously.*]

You ought to—"Alice"—

KIT

[*Makes a furious gesture.*]

SYDNEY

[*Appeasing him.*]

No, no, no! "Alice through the Looking-glass!"

[*More soberly.*]

I can't help it, Kit.

When I look in the looking-glass I see — Alice.

KIT

Once and for all, Sydney, will you shut up about Alice?

SYDNEY

Can't. It's her jam to-day.

KIT

I wish you'd talk sense for a change.

SYDNEY

But I am. I'm conveying to you as nicely and tactfully as possible that I'm —

KIT

[*Apprehensive at last.*]

What, Sydney?

SYDNEY

Tired of jam.

KIT

[*Heavily.*]

D'you mean you're tired of me?

SYDNEY

That would be putting it crudely.

KIT

What's got into you? I don't know you.

SYDNEY

P'r'aps you're beginning to.

KIT

But what have I done?

SYDNEY

[*Flaring effectively.*]

Well, for one thing you shouldn't have told your father we were engaged. What girl, do you suppose, would stand it? You ask Alice.

KIT

[*Flaring in reality.*]

If you're not jolly careful I will.

SYDNEY

[*Egging him on.*]

Good for you!

KIT

[*Furious.*]

And if I do I'll ask her more than that.

SYDNEY

[*Clapping her hands.*]

I should go and do it now, if I were you. Strike while the iron's hot.

KIT

You're mad.

SYDNEY

[*With intense bitterness.*]

Yes, I suppose that's the right word to fling at me.

KIT

[*Between injury and distress.*]

I never meant that. You're twisting the words in my mouth. You're just picking a quarrel.

SYDNEY

[*Lazily.*]

Well, what's one to do with a little boy who won't take his medicine? I tried to give it you in jam.

KIT

[*Curt.*]

You want me to go?

SYDNEY

Yes.

KIT

For good?

SYDNEY

Yes.

KIT

Honest?

SYDNEY

Yes.

KIT

Right.

[*He turns from her and goes out.*]

MARGARET

[*Looking up.*]

Was that Kit? Sydney, don't let him go.

SYDNEY

Kit! Ki-it!

KIT

[*Returning joyfully.*]

Yes! Yes, old thing?

SYDNEY

[*Impassively.*]

Mother wants you.

MARGARET

Oh, Kit — would you take this for me? It's for Mr. Meredith. I expect you'll meet him, but if not, I want you to take it on. At once, Kit.

KIT

Right, Mrs. Fairfield.

MARGARET

You won't forget? It's important.

KIT

I won't.

MARGARET

[*Detaining him.*]

What's the matter, Kit?

KIT

[*His head up.*]

Nothing, Mrs. Fairfield.

SYDNEY

Mother, Kit's got to go.

KIT

[*Resentfully.*]

It's all right. I'm going. You needn't worry.

MARGARET

[*Humorously, washing her hands of them.*]

Oh, you two!

[*She turns away from them and stands, her arm on the mantelpiece, staring into the fire. Kit marches to the door.*]

SYDNEY

[*In spite of herself, softly.*]

Kit!

KIT

[*Quickly.*]

Yes?

SYDNEY

[*Recovering herself, impishly.*]

You'll give her my love?

KIT

You're a beast, Sydney Fairfield!

[*He goes out with a slam.*]

SYDNEY

[*In a changed voice.*]

You'll give her *my* love.

[*Running to the door.*]

Kit!

[*The door opens again, but it is Gray Meredith who comes in.*]

GRAY

Sydney, what's wrong with Kit? He went past me like a gust of wind.

MARGARET

[*Coming up to them.*]

He didn't give you my note?

GRAY

He never looked at me. What note?

MARGARET

I—

GRAY

Aren't you ready? Why aren't you dressed?

MARGARET

I—

GRAY

You must be quick, dearest.

MARGARET

I—

[*She sways where she stands.*]

[*Gray goes to her and, half clinging to him, half repulsing him, she sits down with her arm on the table and her head on her arm.*]

GRAY

Of course! Worn out! You should have come an hour ago.

MARGARET

Yes.

GRAY

Never mind that now. Sydney, get your mother's wraps.

MARGARET

[*Agitated.*]

Sydney — wait — no.

GRAY

Warm things. It's bitter, driving.

SYDNEY

[*Uncertainly.*]

Gray, I think —

GRAY

Get them, please.

[*After a tiny pause and look at him, Sydney obeys. You see her go upstairs and disappear along the gallery.*]

GRAY

[*Solicitous.*]

I was afraid it would come hard on you. Has he — ? But you can tell me all that later.

MARGARET

I must tell it to you now.

GRAY

Be quick, then. We've got a fifty-mile drive before us.

MARGARET

[*Not looking at him.*]

I — I'm not coming.

GRAY

[*Smiling.*]

Not? There, sit quiet a moment. My dear — my dear heart — you're all to pieces.

MARGARET

I'm not coming.

GRAY

[*Checking what he takes for hysteria.*]

Margaret — Margaret —

MARGARET

I'm not coming. It's Hilary.

GRAY

What? Collapsed again? I thought as much.

MARGARET

I —

GRAY

Tragic! But — it simplifies his problem, poor devil. Has Alliot charge of him?

MARGARET

No, no. It's not that. He's not ill. He's well. That's it. He's well — and — he won't let me go.

GRAY

He won't, won't he?

[*He turns from her.*]

MARGARET

Where are you going?

GRAY

To settle this matter. Where is he?

MARGARET

Leave him alone. It's me you must punish. I've made up my mind. Oh, how am I to tell you? He convinced me. He — cried, Gray.

[*Then, as Gray makes a quick gesture.*]

You mustn't sneer. You must understand. He's so unhappy. And there's Sydney to think of. And Gray, he won't marry us.

GRAY

What's that?

MARGARET

The rector. He's been here.

GRAY

[*Furious.*]

My God, why wasn't *I*?

MARGARET

And Aunt Hester — she made it worse.

[*Despairingly.*]

You see what it is — they all think I'm wicked.

GRAY

Damned insolence!

MARGARET

But it's not them — It's Hilary. I did fight them. I can't fight Hilary. I see it. It's my own fault. I ought never to have let myself care for you.

GRAY

Talk sense.

MARGARET

But there it is. It's too much for me. I've got to stay with him.

GRAY

[*For the first time taking her seriously.*]

Say that again, Margaret, if you dare —

MARGARET

I've got to — stay —

[*With a sharp, crying note in her voice.*]

Gray, Gray, don't look at me like that!

[*He turns abruptly away from her and walks across to the hearth. He stands a moment, deep in thought, takes out and lights a cigarette, realizes what he is doing, and with an exclamation flings it into the fire. Then he comes back to Margaret, who has not moved.*]

GRAY

[*Very quietly.*]

This — this is rather an extraordinary statement, isn't it?

MARGARET

[*Shrinking.*]

Don't use — that tone.

GRAY

I am being as patient as I can. But — it's not easy.

MARGARET

Easy — ?

GRAY

Do you mind telling me exactly what you mean?

MARGARET

I can't talk. You know I'm not clever. I'm trying to do what's right —

GRAY

Then shall I tell you?

[*She makes a little quick movement with her hands, but she says nothing.*]

GRAY

[*Watching her keenly while he speaks.*]

You mean that you've made a mistake —

MARGARET

[*Misunderstanding.*]

Yes.

GRAY

— that the last five years goes for nothing — that you don't care for me —

MARGARET

Gray!

GRAY

Wait. That you've never cared for me — that you don't want to marry me —

MARGARET

How can you say these things to me?

GRAY

But aren't they true?

MARGARET

You know — you know they're not true.

GRAY

Then what do you mean when you say "I won't come"?

MARGARET

I mean — Hilary. I've got to put him first because — because he's weak. You — you're strong.

GRAY

Not strong enough to do without my birthright. I want my wife and my children. I've waited a long while for you. Now you must come.

[*Sydney comes down the stairs, a red furred cloak over her arm. She pauses a few steps from the bottom, afraid to break in on them.*]

MARGARET

If Hilary's left alone he'll go mad again.

GRAY

Margaret — come.

MARGARET

How can I?

GRAY

Margaret, my own heart — come.

MARGARET

You oughtn't to torture me. I've got to do what's right.

GRAY

[*Darkening.*]

Are you coming with me? I sha'n't ask it again.

MARGARET

Oh, God — You hear him! What am I to do?

[*Sydney comes down another step.*]

GRAY

Why, you're to do as you choose. I sha'n't force you. I'm not your turnkey. I'm not your beggar. We're free people, you and I. It's for you to say if you'll keep your — conscience, do you call it? — and lose —

MARGARET

I've lost what I love. There's no more to lose.

GRAY

You sing as sweetly as a toy nightingale. Almost I'd think you were real.

MARGARET

[*Wounded.*]

I don't know what you mean.

GRAY

"What you love!" You don't know the meaning of the notes you use.

MARGARET

[*Very white, but her voice is steady.*]

Don't deceive yourself. I love you. I ache and faint for you. I starve —

SYDNEY

[*Appalled, whispering.*]

What is it? I don't know her.

MARGARET

I'm withering without you like cut grass in the sun. I love you. I love you. Can't you see how it is with me? But —

GRAY

There's no "but" in love.

MARGARET

What is it in me? There is a thing I can't do. I can't see such pain.

GRAY

[*Hoarsely.*]

Do you think *I* can't suffer?

MARGARET

I *am* you. But he — he's so defenseless. It's vivisection — like cutting a dumb beast about to make me well. I can't do it. I'd rather die of my cancer.

GRAY

[*The storm breaking.*]

Die then — you fool — you fool!

[*Sydney descends another step. The cloak slides from her hands on to the baluster.*]

GRAY

[*Without expression.*]

Good-by.

MARGARET

[*Blindly.*]

Forgive —

GRAY

How can I?

MARGARET

I would you —

GRAY

D'you think I bear you malice? It's not I. Why, to deny me, that's a little thing. I'll not go under because you're faithless. But what you're doing is the sin without forgiveness. You're denying — not me — but life. You're denying the spirit of life. You're denying — you're denying your mate.

SYDNEY

[*Strung up to breaking point.*]

Mother, you shall not.

MARGARET

[*As they both turn.*]

Sydney!

SYDNEY

[*Coming down to them.*]

I tell you — I tell you, you shall not.

MARGARET

[*Sitting down, with a listless gesture.*]

There's no way out.

SYDNEY

There is. For *you* there is. I've thought it all along, and now I know. Father — he's my job, not yours.

MARGARET

[*With a last flicker of passion.*]

D'you think I'll make a scapegoat of my own child?

SYDNEY

[*Sternly.*]

Can you help it? I'm *his* child.

[*She throws herself down beside her.*]

Mother! Mother darling, don't you see? You're no good to him. You're scared of him. But I'm his own flesh and blood. I know how he feels. I'll make him happier than you can. Be glad for me. Be glad I'm wanted somewhere.

MARGARET

[*Struggling against the hope that is flooding her.*]

But Kit, Sydney — Kit?

SYDNEY

[*With a queer little laugh that ends, though it does not begin, quite naturally.*]

Bless him, I'll be dancing at his wedding in six months.

MARGARET

But all you ought to have —

SYDNEY

[*Jumping up, flippantly.*]

Oh, I'm off getting married. I'm going to have a career.

MARGARET

— the love — the children —

SYDNEY

[*Strained.*]

No children for me, mother. No children for me. I've lost my chance for ever.

MARGARET

[*Weakly.*]

No — no —

SYDNEY

[*Smiling down at her.*]

But you — you take it. I give it to you.

MARGARET

But —

SYDNEY

[*Dominant.*]

What's the use of arguing? I've made up my mind.

MARGARET

But if your father —

SYDNEY

[*At the end of her endurance.*]

Go away, mother. Go away quickly. This is my job, not yours.

[*She turns abruptly from them to the window, and stands staring out into the darkening garden.*]

MARGARET

[*Dazed.*]

So — so —

[*She sways, hesitating, unbelieving, like a bird at the open door of its cage.*]

So — I can come.

[*He makes no answer.*]

MARGARET

[*With a new full note in her voice.*]

Gray, I can come.

GRAY

[*Without moving.*]

Can you, Margaret?

MARGARET

[*In heaven.*]

I can come.

GRAY

[*Impassively.*]

Are you sure?

MARGARET

[*In quick alarm.*]

What do you mean?

GRAY

[*Stonily.*]

Why, you could deny me. You've chopped and changed. I want proof that you've still a right to come.

MARGARET

[*Like a child.*]

You're angry with me?

GRAY

No.

MARGARET

You're angry with me?

GRAY

I want proof.

MARGARET

I get frightened. I'm made so. Always I've been afraid — of Hilary — of every one — of life. But

now — you — you're angry, you're so angry, you're very angry with me — and I —

[*She goes steadily across the room to him. He makes no movement.*]

I'm not afraid.

[*She puts up her hands and, drawing him down to her, kisses him on the mouth.*]

Is that proof?

GRAY

[*Quietly.*]

Proof enough. Come.

[*He takes the cloak and throws it round her. They go out together. As Sydney, forgotten, stands looking after them, Bassett enters with the tea tray. She puts it down on the table and turns up the lights.*]

BASSETT

Is the gentleman staying to tea, miss?

SYDNEY

[*Correcting her.*]

Mr. Fairfield. It's my father, Bassett.

BASSETT

We thought so, miss.

SYDNEY

[*Smiling faintly.*]

Did you, Bassett?

BASSETT

He's got your way, miss! Quick-like,

[*She opens the drawing-room door.*]

Tea's ready, ma'am.

[*Outside the motor drives away.*]

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Entering with Hilary.*]

Tea's very late.

[*Bassett goes out.*]

HILARY

I thought I heard the sound of a car.

[*Suspiciously.*]

Where's your mother?

SYDNEY

She's gone away.

HILARY

[*Stricken.*]

Gone?

SYDNEY

Gone away for good.

HILARY

Where?

SYDNEY

Out of our lives.

HILARY

With — ?

SYDNEY

[*Quickly.*]

Out of our lives.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Furiously.*]

This is your doing, Sydney.

HILARY

[*Dazed.*]

Gone. Everything gone.

SYDNEY

I'm not gone.

HILARY

But that boy — ?

SYDNEY

That's done with.

MISS FAIRFIELD

You've jilted him?

SYDNEY

Yes.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Like mother, like daughter.

SYDNEY

Just so.

MISS FAIRFIELD

I pray you get your punishment.

SYDNEY

Your prayers will surely be answered, auntie.

HILARY

[*Slowly.*]

It was a cruel thing to do.

SYDNEY

He'll get over it. Men — they're not like us.

HILARY

[*Timidly.*]

You loved him?

SYDNEY

What's that to any one but me?

HILARY

[*Peering at her.*]

You're crying.

SYDNEY

I'm not.

HILARY

You love him?

SYDNEY

I suppose so.

HILARY

Then why? Then why?

SYDNEY

We're in the same boat, father.

MISS FAIRFIELD

Yes, that's the way they talk now, Hilary. They know too much, the young women. It upsets everything.

[*Hilary sits down on the sofa.*]

HILARY

[*Broken.*]

I don't see ahead. I don't see what's to become of me. There's no one.

SYDNEY

There's me.

HILARY

[*Not looking at her.*]

I should think you hate me.

SYDNEY

I need you just as badly as you need me.

HILARY

[*Fiercely.*]

It's your damn clever doing that she went. D'you think I can't hate you?

SYDNEY

[*Close to him.*]

No, no, father, you want me too much. We'll make a good job of it yet.

HILARY

[*His head in his hands.*]

What job?

SYDNEY

[*Petting him, coaxing him, loving him, her hands quieting his twitching hands, her strong will already controlling him.*]

Living. I've got such plans already, father — father, dear! We'll do things. We'll have a good time somehow, you and I — you and I. Did you know you'd got a clever daughter? Writing — painting — acting! We'll go on tour together. We'll make a lot of money. We'll have a cottage somewhere. You see, I'll make it up to you. I'll make you proud of me.

MISS FAIRFIELD

[*Surveying them.*]

Proud of her! D'you see, Hilary! That's all she thinks of — self — self — self! Money — ambition — and sends that poor boy away. A parson's son! Not good enough for her, that's what it is. She's like the rest of the young women — hard as nails! Hard as nails!

SYDNEY

[*Crying out.*]

Don't listen to her, father! Father, don't believe her! I'm not hard. I'm not hard.

[*His arm goes round her with a gesture, awkward, timid, yet fatherly.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

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